

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF ROMA INCLUSION

Perspectives from Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria



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**Gender Dimensions of Roma Inclusion:
Perspectives from Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria**

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Executive Summary

i. **The ‘Gender Dimensions of Roma Inclusion’ study conveys gender-informed Roma perspectives on the historical challenge of their social inclusion in Bulgaria.** It is based on qualitative research consisting of neighborhood questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs) with women and men of varying age groups, and mini case studies. The research was conducted in four Roma communities (Byala Slatina, Hristo Botev, Sheker Mahala, and Vesselinovo) selected by regional representation, extent of urbanization, and adherence to traditional lifestyles and isolation from mainstream society. The study contributes to efforts in implementing the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy 2012 – 2020, and developing Roma targeted policies and programs.

Roma communities in Bulgaria

ii. **The Roma constitute about 4.7 percent of Bulgaria’s population, though estimates vary due to contested identities.** The Roma number approximately 371,000 according to official figures (National Statistical Institute, 2001) and are the third largest group after ethnic-Bulgarians (83.9 percent of the population) and Turks (9.4 percent). Other minorities (Arabs, Armenians, Russians, and others) account for 0.9 percent of the population. In the 2011 Population Census, Roma numbered only about 325,000. This number is likely to be an underestimate since the 2011 census relied on Roma self-identification. A 2007 UNDP survey estimated the number of Roma in Bulgaria to be 700,000-800,000 individuals, including individuals of mixed ethnicity.

iii. **The Roma in Bulgaria are an extremely heterogeneous group and the four communities that the study focuses on reflect this.** There are possibly as many as 60 subgroups, demonstrating variations in nature of residence, spatial location, culture, language, tradition, religion, occupation, and extent of integration with the wider society. These groups exhibit diverse social patterns, livelihood, economic wellbeing, health, and education. With very few exceptions, the majority of the Roma lead settled lives and are distributed across both urban and rural areas in the country.

iv. **Bulgarian Roma suffer from acute social exclusion and the transition from planned to a market economy has worsened the overall economic and employment situation of the Roma.** Roma are among the groups most severely affected by the extensive long-term unemployment that resulted from the transition. High rates of poverty, unemployment, low human development indicators, poor living conditions, low quality infrastructure, and other services all point to severe social exclusion. Social exclusion for Roma has been historically associated with prejudices and stereotypes. Thus far Roma integration policies have not had much success at alleviating the situation of the communities.

v. **The EU and its member states have only recently increased their focus on the particular situation of Roma women and started to explore their role in promoting inclusion.** Principle number five of the EU's 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion notes that effective Roma inclusion policy initiatives must take into account the needs and circumstances of Roma women and address issues such as multiple discrimination and problems of access to social services. In order to address these issues effectively it is necessary to analyze the particular situation of Roma women and men, and the challenges they are facing inside and outside their communities and explore in more detail the root causes of their social exclusion.

Social norms, agency and strategic life choices

vi. **This study investigates the key factors and mechanisms that promote or inhibit social inclusion of the Roma with the wider Bulgarian society by examining the social norms, agency, and strategic life choices, from a gender perspective in the four communities.** The study pursues three research questions to deepen the understanding of Roma communities and contribute to identifying effective inclusion policies. These are: (i) What are the key gender related social norms that influence agency, and how do they vary across and within the four communities included in the research? (ii) What does agency mean in respect to making strategic life choices, and how does it differ for women and men, and across the communities? and (iii) What can we draw from our understanding of norms, agency, and life choices to inform policies that will support Roma inclusion, and thereby the implementation of Bulgaria's National Strategy for Roma Integration?

vii. **The EU's working definition of social inclusion is used in this study as a lens to analyze Roma communities.** The definition states that: "Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have a greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights."

viii. **Understanding the 'agency' of Roma men and women is instrumental in determining the nature and type of policy and operational interventions that are likely to facilitate inclusion.** This study attempts to generate a better understanding of the ability of Roma men and women to make strategic life choices, make decisions, and control resources. It sheds light on how this agency, in turn, influences basic human conditions and demand for social services. This study thus tries to reveal some of the reasons why, for example, Roma girls tend to drop out of school at a young age, why early marriage is preferred, or why (younger) Roma women are less likely to be employed.

Gender roles in Roma communities

ix. **While traditional gender norms are largely intact and similar across the four communities, a disconnect between proclaimed values and its practice can be observed.** Focus group discussions about what constitutes a “good wife” and a “good husband” conveyed the most idealized views of gender roles and norms in these communities. These views do not necessarily reflect the realities of the discussants’ daily lives nor the aspirations they might have for their lives in the future. In fact, once discussions went deeper into the subject matter, discussants often describe situations in which gender roles and social norms are under considerable stress. The gap between traditional norms and what is practiced in reality is widening.

x. **The Roma communities are witnessing change around several gender norms.** The extent of change varies across communities and norms, including: gender equality and the notion that men are superior to women; the association of manhood with the role of provider for the family; and the virginity of women before marriage. The study observed that Roma communities are struggling with these norms in their attempt to reconcile traditional values with what is practiced and emerging.

xi. **While gender equality is not a widely accepted value, a process of reevaluation and renegotiation of gender roles has started in some of the communities.** These changes are particularly visible in sharing domestic responsibilities. Educated women openly challenge the traditional division of labor in Roma families and demand men play a more active role in household chores and childcare responsibilities.

xii. **Roma men are increasingly failing to live up to the role of the provider for the family as persistent poverty, unemployment, and the inability to generate steady incomes is taking its toll.** Unemployed Roma men feel that they have failed as a man, husband, and father. As a consequence, the authority of men inside the family is declining. Those who strongly subscribe to traditional gender values (seen in all four communities, more so in the rural communities) increasingly feel that they have lost their position in society.

xiii. **The declining authority of Roma men inside the family is a primary cause for high stress levels inside households and a perceived increase in domestic violence.** Despite traditional gender roles being formally upheld, *de facto* male authority in the family seems to be increasingly challenged by women, particularly in the absence of income originating from men. The main reason cited for increased domestic violence and conflicts between husband and wife are: unemployment, lack of food and money, and everyday domestic arguments over how family income should be distributed and spent. Men feel that they are being held accountable for the dire economic situations of the family without being able to solve it. They are frustrated because they cannot live up to traditional expectations. Men resort to conflict and domestic violence to reassert their dominance as they struggle to live up to their provider status.

xiv. **The virginity of women prior to marriage is a defining feature of women in all the Roma communities. Public discussions relating to virginity typically cause a lot of friction between traditional and non-traditional Roma girls, reflecting the changing views on the gender values of virginity and womanhood.** The vast majority of those aged 40 to 60 across all the communities state that education is important and necessary for Roma boys and girls to find work. This strong conviction does not stop the traditional Roma communities from removing the girls from schooling before or by the eighth grade to protect her virginity and prepare her for marriage. In these communities, primary education is considered enough for girls to become “a good wife and a good mother.” Girls who continue their education past the age of 16 run the risk of being labeled “morally rotten,” which adversely impacts their finding a “good” husband. However, the discussions also revealed that young Roma women are increasingly feeling torn between adhering to traditional values versus modern attitudes and lifestyles. Frictions among Roma girls were observed around premarital relationships with boys; non-traditional lifestyles such as those practiced in mainstream Bulgarian society (e.g. go out in town to spend time with friends); adherence to cultural values (e.g. the notion of a “good wife”); and music and dance traditions (belly dancing, folk music). Traditional girls reiterate that they have a better understanding of morality and domestic issues and are willing to make sacrifices such as stopping education to benefit their families. They accuse the girls with “modern” attitudes of moral misconduct, sexual profligacy, laziness, and irresponsibility. The relatively better educated and less traditional Roma women disagree with them.

Intra-household and intra-community dynamics

xv. **Intra-household and inter-generational relationships are in a state of flux as gender roles continue to evolve.** As the traditional gender roles are increasingly breaking down, the behavior between members of the family are being affected. The senior members of the household—including parents and grandparents—are increasingly feeling the erosion of their influence on younger generations. They report that they are no longer able to exert a high level of influence on their children and grandchildren or make decisions for the family. They feel powerless against the new norms and values that the younger generations are adopting from the mainstream society.

xvi. **Rituals and customary practices that enforce traditional gender relations are changing – often due to poverty – thus contributing to a change in gender norms.** Traditional rituals and customs around marriage—e.g. pre-arranged marriages by parents—are becoming increasingly rare. In the most traditional communities, the practice of “purchasing the bride” (i.e. paying a dowry for her virginity) is still practiced, but parents are often no longer able to pay the requisite dowry (*babahak*) and are settling for less. Marriages are delayed and couples co-habit before marriage. Motherhood outside of marriage is further influenced by social assistance programs focused on single mothers. All this impacts notions of being a good girl or good wife, and further increases the gap between stated gender norms and the reality.

xvii. **The perceived failure to comply with social and gender norms inside the community is altering the social capital and social standing of families, resulting in high levels of unhappiness.** The inability to carry out rituals and customs is stressful, particularly among Roma men. Traditionally, men invested considerable shares of their earnings in celebrations, festivities, and social commitments, including the *babahak* (dowry) for their sons' marriages, while being able to comfortably provide for their family. Investing in these social events enhanced the family's social capital, standing, and esteem in the community. Declining social capital creates additional levels of stress for Roma men and their families, and is fundamentally altering community relationships.

Education

xviii. **Where the pressure of traditional social norms is strong, boys are pushed towards fulfilling the role of the provider instead of attending school.** Girls find it almost impossible to continue education after reaching puberty, since concerns about the loss of virginity preclude them from leaving the domestic space. All four Roma communities report additional factors that impede educational achievements, including: the distant location of schools from home, the poor quality of the curriculum, and financial constraints. Education outcomes are generally lower for those Roma who do not speak Bulgarian at home, since knowing Bulgarian provides a significant boost to education achievements.

xix. **In poor communities, it is common for boys to leave school to support their families; to conform to the traditional gender norm of providing for their families; to be perceived as hardworking and not lazy; and to supplement the income of their fathers or brothers.** Typically parents of these children are unemployed. Even if parents profess to prefer their children get educated, it is not uncommon for boys aged 12 or 13 to be looking for work to help feed their families. Even when they do not leave school altogether, boys skip school to earn money, like collecting recyclable materials and exchanging them for cash.

xx. **The significant value attached to the virginity of brides leads parents to pull their daughters out of school when they reach puberty.** As a result, Roma girls are often constrained in making strategic life choices related to education. Some parents are mostly concerned about the safety of their daughters in commuting (being approached by men while commuting); other parents do not want their daughters to be in contact with boys at all. The concern for safety leads to early dropouts not only for girls, but also boys, especially in urban areas (i.e. Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala), where the fear of ethnicity-motivated violence is strong.

xxi. **Parents' commitment to supporting their daughters' and sons' education is the most prominent characteristic of students who pursue higher education.** More liberal, often urban parents encourage and support their children's education, including in integrated schools that are usually located outside the community. Research suggests that Roma who attend integrated

schools outside their communities—studying alongside ethnic Bulgarians--do particularly well with regard to educational outcomes.

xxii. **Family support for and investments in education seem to be the key factors that positively impact the life trajectory of Roma girls.** Girls who continue education are more likely to adopt the Bulgarian language, and to seek a professional career in the general Bulgarian society. They are better prepared to renegotiate traditional norms and values inside the family and within the community. For example, they balance the use of time for household chores and homework. As a consequence they are able to exert a greater degree of agency when it comes to making strategic life choices.

Marriage and Pregnancy

xxiii. **Social norms around marriage and pregnancy are undergoing changes but remain strongly affected by traditional values.** The age of Roma girls at marriage and first pregnancy is slowly increasing across the four communities. This trend is, however, less pronounced in the most traditional communities, where women’s education is interrupted at the onset of puberty when girls are pressured to marry. Girls who are not pressured to marry young have more control over strategic life choices such as pursuing higher education and their age at marriage or first pregnancy.

xxiv. **Young Roma couples are increasingly choosing to informally cohabit instead of seeking formal marriage, often due to limited financial resources.** The young Roma are trying to cope with their constrained economic environment by opting to cohabit or marry informally, rather than formally marry their partners. They can then continue to benefit from state-sponsored social payments to single mothers and avoid administrative charges related to marriage.¹ Cohabitation also saves on wedding expenditures like the ceremony and dowry, especially in more traditional communities where these customs are still commonly practiced.² This trend towards cohabitation is affecting social norms around the commitment to the relationship, with separations and “serial monogamy” becoming increasingly frequent.

xxv. **Particularly in communities where women’s roles are mostly limited to domestic work, the recent rise in informal marriages has made wives more vulnerable to being abandoned by their husbands.** The decline of legal marriages has made separation easier and

¹ While young Roma in general confirm the economic motives of cohabitation, the elderly in communities point out that Roma couples usually start cohabitating at a very young age, when they cannot legally marry. By the time they reach the legal age for marriage, many couples are already separated.

² For example, this does not seem to be a motive for the Kalaydzhi group in Byala Slatina, and the majority of Roma in Hristo Botev, because expenditures on dowries are not common.

has affected the payment of alimony. Additionally, the likelihood of separation has increased due to economic hardship, which often causes increased tension between partners. It is generally believed that when a Roma woman is abandoned, she becomes more exposed to the risks of trafficking and prostitution.

xxvi. **Traditional social norms around men’s sexual potency and the importance of fertility promote early pregnancies and limit the uptake of contraceptive methods.** Strongly rooted values around masculinity and fertility make marriage almost synonymous with pregnancy. As a result, marriage often coincides with the end of Roma youth’s education. For Roma girls, adhering to traditional values around pregnancy and child rearing prevails over continuing their own education. For boys, providing for the family takes precedence over education. Women’s control over the number of children they have appears to be increasing across all communities. Yet it is still uncommon for women to use contraceptives, resulting in abortion being the most commonly used method of birth control.

Employment

xxvii. **As men are no longer able to live up to the norm of “provider” in an environment of persistent poverty and unemployment, Roma women are increasingly expected to contribute to the family income.** This is altering gender roles, though not without a psychological toll on men as traditional values and social norms are still the point of reference for strategic life choices. In all the surveyed communities, women report that they were willing to take any job that covers their transportation costs. Women in more traditional communities (i.e. Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo) reported that their husbands decide whether women should work or not. They usually prefer women not to work outside of the neighborhood or after dark, in fear of other men approaching their wives.

xxviii. **Migration led by women, not just by men, is becoming a key strategy to generate income for families.** When women migrate it is often without their children and husband.³ As labor markets in Western Europe, particularly Greece and Cyprus, are contracting, the duration of migration has shortened from several years to several months for Roma men. Roma women, who largely work in domestic jobs such as taking care of the children and the elderly, stay for longer periods abroad. This imbalance in time abroad between men and women creates considerable tensions inside families and the community (e.g. women leave their families to live abroad and start new relationships, while men experience feelings of loss, loneliness, and abandonment by their wives).

³ In the case of Sheker Mahala, it was emphasized that only divorced/separated women migrate abroad without their husbands.

xxix. **Women's higher education generates new values to their employment and is changing the outlook of their role in family life.** Roma women who are pursuing higher education do not view their work as a mere means to earn additional income. It is a form of self-expression, and they are beginning to expect more involvement from their partners and husbands in household chores and in raising children. Some young and educated men are ready to renegotiate the distribution of family duties and obligations relating to childcare and household chores.

Policy recommendations

xxx. **Roma communities are caught between traditional values and social norms; contrasted with the imperatives of their economic situation, as well as the aspirations and practices of modern Bulgarian society.** The renegotiation of social and gender norms can be witnessed across all surveyed communities, albeit to varying degrees. This renegotiation process creates considerable levels of stress between the sexes, inside families as well as in the communities. The economic hardship that most communities are experiencing further aggravates these tensions. Policies should acknowledge and respond to these challenges. Gender-sensitive Roma inclusion policies could focus on (1) supporting household members in assuming new roles; (2) addressing the new types of vulnerabilities that have emerged in Roma communities due to changing social norms; and (3) increasing opportunities in education and employment as they are most clearly linked to improved social inclusion outcomes. While many of these policies need to be customized to suit the specific contexts of Roma, it is recommended that they be applied equally to other vulnerable and marginalized population in Bulgaria to avoid stigmatization of Roma.

(1) Supporting household members in assuming new roles:

- **Create a safe and enabling work environment for women.** In order to enable women to participate in the labor market, obstacles such as costly transportation and conflicting responsibilities such as childcare need to be addressed by:
 - (a) Affordable and accessible childcare options for Roma parents;
 - (b) Safe and accessible public transport to facilitate commuting, especially after dark; and
 - (c) Incentives for private companies that provide an enabling work environment for women (including childcare support and provision of safe transport).
- **Provide more accessible options and information related to family planning.** Increasing awareness about the consequences of early pregnancy and improving the accessibility to different family planning methods can help young Roma couples cope better with the shifting social and economic conditions. Specific actions could include:

- (a) Provision of Roma-sensitive family planning services at the community level to reach out to and educate Roma men and women about family planning; and
 - (b) Introduction of a wider range of contraceptives than are currently available to Roma women.
 - (c) Inclusion of reproductive education in school curriculum to better inform young people about family planning.
- **Provide advisory support and counseling services.** New single mothers and fathers, working mothers, and husbands of working mothers would all benefit from specialized services that would facilitate their transition to and uptake of new roles.
 - **Develop targeted programs for adolescent Roma men and women to support them in making strategic life choices in the light of social and economic change.** Adolescents and young adults would benefit from programs and support structures that help them negotiate the tensions created by aspirations for new lifestyles and traditional norms that currently create high levels of stress inside the family and the community. Support structures could assist with the identification of coping mechanisms for the individuals, their families, and their communities.

(2) Addressing new forms of vulnerability inside Roma communities:

- **Review and readjust the distorted incentive structures of social assistance programs related to the social status of beneficiaries.** The social assistance programs to be reviewed may include:
 - (a) Social assistance for single mothers, which is discouraging Roma couples' formal marriages and making Roma women and children vulnerable in the case of separation;
 - (b) Social assistance for children of divorced parents, since complex application procedures (often entailing legal procedures) make receiving assistance extremely difficult. Because of this, women often prefer seeking social assistance for single mothers (which has less complex application procedures). They prefer to stay single legally rather than risk encountering the barriers to receive social assistance for children of divorced parents in case of separation.
 - (c) Provisions of the "protection of mothers law," which continues to provide incentives for young women to bear children in order to qualify for child allowance and build contributions towards their pension.
- **Increase legal protection in case of separation.** As cohabitation without marriage is increasing, it is important to increase the legal protection for men, women, and their

children in case of separation (guardians other than the biological partners may need to be considered as well).

(3) Increasing opportunities for education and employment:

- **Introduce measures to offset the opportunity costs of education and increase the return on investment of education.** These measures could include:

(a) Incentives for Roma children to attend pre-school and kindergarten programs where they acquire Bulgarian language skills before entering first grade, thereby increasing their educational achievements. These incentives could be either financial or non-financial, and could be further coordinated with existing programs. Conditions attached to child allowance, for example, can be refined to increase Roma families' investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD).

(b) Provision of safe and affordable transportation means for Roma students to attend school—this would increase both boys' and girls' attendance, especially in communities that are a large distance from secondary schools;

(c) Creation of school learning environments compatible with the social norms and values of Roma people, especially for girls. Factors to pay particular attention to are the safety of adolescent girls, the convenience of class-hours, and the dignity of under-privileged children;⁴

(d) Incentives and mechanisms to ensure higher performance of schools in Roma neighborhoods. Possible measures include performance-based funding and salaries to give additional incentives for schools and teachers to improve the learning performance of the students enrolled in their school.⁵ To avoid distorted results, it is important to ensure that performance is monitored with transparency and integrity;

(e) Reassessment of the adequacy of social assistance programs, taking account of the costs of schooling, including the opportunity costs. Social assistance programs cover only the direct costs of schooling whereas the size of the opportunity costs appears to figure prominently in parental and student decisions toward schooling;

(f) Better enforcement of school attendance policies. School attendance, both the days attended and the duration of attendance day, could be monitored more rigorously with

⁴ These measures should avoid creating segregation of Roma students.

⁵ The Roma participants of this study suggested providing these incentives on a premium-basis, as opposed to punitive-basis, since punitive measures could further discourage teachers. It would require the budget for the respective year to include sufficient resources to fund these incentives.

verifiable evidence and possibly with penalties for over-reporting.⁶ The integrity of the monitoring of school attendance is key to ensuring that conditional social assistance programs and other incentives yield the intended results.

- **Address negative stereotypes and discrimination against Roma in the labor market.** Specific actions include communications campaigns and the development of educational tools (to be used in schools and work places) to combat negative stereotypes.

xxxii. **More generally, improving the policies for effective Roma inclusion will require better processes for identifying policy measures:** understanding the Roma communities at the level of the household and the community, as well as the heterogeneity of the Roma across the country; undertaking empirical studies to learn more about the internal dynamics relating to social norms, gender roles, decision-making, and tensions around social change, as well as the barriers to social inclusion and development; taking concrete steps to address the negative stereotypes of the Roma that lead to discrimination in the school and work place environment; and actively involving the Roma in formulating and implementing integration policies and programs.

xxxiii. **Development programs can only be effective if they are customized and take into account the diversity across Roma communities in Bulgaria.** Roma communities are remarkably heterogeneous and in that context “one size fit all” policies are unlikely to succeed. In the four communities researched for this study, change is happening at very different rates and in very different ways. Community workers must be involved since they are intimately familiar with their Roma neighborhoods. Facilitators are likely to make an enormous difference in the way social inclusion policies and programs reach the communities since they understand the customs and traditions, the real or perceived barriers in accessing social services, and have a relationship of trust with key community members.

xxxiiii. **Roma communities need to be empowered to actively participate in the development and implementation of policies and programs to ensure their effectiveness.**⁷ If the Roma are permitted to lead in conceiving development solutions for themselves, the policies are likely to be relevant, customized and generate a higher impact on the ground.

⁶ This does not mean penalties on absenteeism. Regular attendance should be positively rewarded through incentive mechanisms such as conditional cash transfers, rather than punishing absenteeism.

⁷ Participation of Roma communities in the drafting of the National Strategy for Roma Integration (2012-2020), for example, contributed to enhancing the relevance of the strategy, and is a good practice that could be replicated and further extended.

List of Acronyms

| | |
|----------|---|
| DG Regio | European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy |
| EC | European Commission |
| EU | European Union |
| FGD(s) | Focus Group Discussion(s) |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technologies |
| IUD | Intrauterine Device |
| NRIS | National Roma Integration Strategy |
| NSI | National Statistics Institute of Bulgaria |
| OSI | Open Society Institute |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Program |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| WB | World Bank |
| WDR | World Development Report |

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

1. **The ‘Gender Dimensions of Roma Inclusion’ study employs a qualitative approach to inform the development of effective Roma inclusion policies and programs in Bulgaria.** The Roma are currently among the least integrated minority group in Bulgaria. They are one of the most marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated groups.⁸ This study investigates the key factors and mechanisms that promote or inhibit social inclusion of the Roma with the wider Bulgarian society by examining their social norms, agency, and strategic life choices from a gender perspective. The gender dimension of Roma exclusion has so far been overlooked when the socially constructed roles and behaviors of women and men reflect traditions of society. These can shed light on Roma perspectives on inclusion. The study draws upon, and complements, quantitative studies and surveys undertaken by the World Bank and UNDP.⁹ The research initially focused on strategic life choices in the areas of (i) education, (ii) employment, (iii) marriage and pregnancy, and (iv) sex work. The absence of robust and reliable data on the last area led the study to focus on the top three areas.
2. **The study pursues three research questions to deepen the understanding of Roma communities and their inclusion.** These are: (i) What are the key gender-related social norms that influence agency in the Roma communities included in the research, and how do they vary across and within these communities? (ii) What does agency mean in respect to making strategic life choices, and how does it differ in terms of women and men, and across the communities? and (iii) What can we draw from our understanding of norms, agency, and life choices that can inform stakeholders in developing policies that will support their inclusion, and thereby the implementation of Bulgaria’s National Strategy for Roma Integration?

⁸ Literature on Roma discrimination reveals that the practice of discrimination is most notable in Central and Eastern Europe, where over two-thirds of the Roma population of Europe are concentrated. Attempts at mass migration by the Roma to Western Europe and North America after 2001 has led to a series of deportations, violence, and discriminative policies in the recipient countries, especially in Italy, France, Germany, Holland, Finland, and Canada. An international comparative study carried out in 2009 by the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS) reveals that the top ten countries where minorities experience the highest levels of discrimination over a 12 month period, in descending order, are: Roma in Czech Republic (64 percent), Africans in Malta (63 percent), Roma in Hungary (62 percent), Roma in Poland (59 percent), Roma in Greece (55 percent), Sub-Saharan Africans in Ireland (54 percent), North Africans in Italy (52 percent), Somalis in Finland (47 percent); Somalis in Denmark (46 percent); and Brazilians in Portugal (44 percent). On average, each Roma experienced more incidents of discrimination over a 12 month period than other aggregate groups surveyed.

⁹ This study uses data from EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data. Data on the Roma in Bulgaria is debated since the new census figures on the actual numbers of the Roma are based on the principle of self-identification, and the new number is vulnerable to the influence of the Roma seeking to address the prejudice and stereotypes of the Roma in the sociopolitical landscape of Bulgaria.

3. **The social inclusion of the Roma is a historical challenge, not just in Bulgaria, but in other parts of the world.** The Roma have suffered centuries of exclusion and discrimination, and the challenge to integrate them into mainstream society has been persistent. The study uses the EU's working definition of social inclusion as a lens to analyze Roma communities. It states: "Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have a greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights."¹⁰ This definition provides a solid basis for a discussion of the social inclusion of the Roma in Bulgaria.¹¹ According to a recent World Bank study, Roma inclusion is not only beneficial to the Roma, but also smart economics benefitting the entire society.¹²
4. **A better understanding of Roma communities will provide stakeholders with clues to design more relevant, inclusive, and targeted policy and programs.** There are few qualitative studies of the Roma in Bulgaria that aim to shed light on how the Roma encounter and embrace the transition of Bulgarian society and economy as it moves towards being a member of the European Union. There is even less research undertaken on a Roma perspective on how the Roma are responding to the development policies and programs devised for them. This study brings to the fore Roma perspectives while focusing on gender roles that are shaped by their social norms. Further, this study looks at how these norms (and roles) are changing as they encounter the values and practices of the modernization of Bulgaria. This study does not provide explicit policy recommendations since it only looks at a handful of Roma communities in Bulgaria; however, it does identify areas that need to be examined for policy development towards better inclusion of the Roma communities.
5. **This study is organized as follows.** It begins with a description of the Roma in Bulgaria. It reveals the diversities of the Roma across the country while highlighting some of the general poverty and human development data of the Roma in Bulgaria that show the extent of their exclusion. The chapter ends with some of the key measures taken by the Government of Bulgaria to address the exclusion and development of the Roma in recent history. Chapter 2 depicts the framework of the study and the methodological approach. It describes the survey

¹⁰ Social Exclusion and the EU's Social Inclusion Agenda (World Bank, 2007)

¹¹ This study acknowledges that there are other definitions of social inclusion and social exclusion; however the EU definition captures most of the basic elements of social inclusion for the purposes of the analysis.

¹² World Bank, 2011. Roma Inclusion is Smart Economics - Illustrations from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania and Serbia.

instruments, the scope and the limitations of the research. Chapter 3 discusses the findings of the study in terms of gender roles and social norms. It explains how norms and roles are changing in the context of the socioeconomic conditions such as persistent poverty, unemployment, and the pressure to adopt alternative lifestyles. Chapter 4 delves into understanding how social norms and agency influence the strategic life choices of Roma men and women, and consequently if these aid them in integrating with the broader Bulgarian society. Chapter 5 concludes the study by pointing to areas that might be explored further for the development of inclusive policies that will benefit the Roma in Bulgaria.

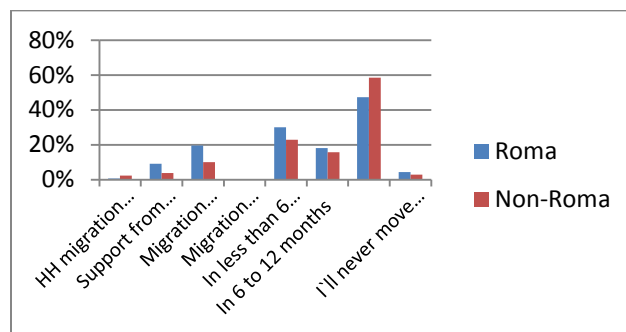
6. **The Roma in Bulgaria constitute about 4.7 percent of the population, though estimates vary due to contested identities, and they live alongside other minorities.**¹³ The Roma number approximately 370,908 according to official figures (National Statistical Institute, 2001) and are the third largest group after ethnic-Bulgarians (83.9 percent of the population) and Turks (9.4 percent). Other minorities (Arabs, Armenian, Russians, and others) account for 0.9 percent of the population. However, the policy of self-identification of the Roma adopted by the authorities in the Population Census of 2011 has brought the number down to 325,343. It seems that a part of the population that had earlier been classified ‘Roma’ has chosen not to be identified as such. Indeed there are contestations around identity as groups and subgroups within the Roma seek to break out of the Roma-specific stigmas and seek identification with other groups such as ethnic-Bulgarians or Turks. A 2007 UNDP survey estimated the Roma population in Bulgaria between 700,000 and 800,000, including individuals of mixed ethnicity, which is almost twice the NSI 2001 figure.
7. **The Roma in Bulgaria are an extremely heterogeneous group and any generalization would not do justice to the variations in social and economic situations, livelihood, spatial distribution, human development, religion, traditions, and cultural processes.** As many as 60 Roma sub-groups or distinct Roma communities exist based on origins, nature of residence, geographical territory, culture, language, religion, traditional occupation, and extent of integration within the wider society. There exist claims and counter claims on origins and movements of the Roma communities among historians, scholars on Roma and ethnic studies, and the Roma themselves. Many claim that these sub-groups can be traced back to three broad groupings. The *Yerlii* are the largest group numbering between 325,000 and 400,000. They are predominantly Muslim and appear to be settled since the Ottoman Empire. The *Kalderashi* number between 15,000 and 20,000. They profess to be Christian

¹³ This study does not take a position on the exact number of Roma in Bulgaria, which remains contested. It is a qualitative study that is focused on the gender dimensions of Roma inclusion in Bulgaria. The Roma population figures mentioned here are merely indicative and drawn from sources attributed in the main text or footnotes.

Orthodox and appear to be nomadic. They are conjectured to have arrived from the north (e.g. Serbia, Moldova, and Romania) after the Crimean War (1853-1856). The *Rudari* or *Ludari* number between 60,000 to 70,000, and speak Romanian/a variation of Romanian according to ethnographic studies.

8. **With very few exceptions, the majority of the Roma lead settled lives and are distributed across both urban and rural areas in the country.** Except for a few nomadic communities, the vast majority of Roma communities are settled both in urban and rural Bulgaria. According to the NSI 2001 census data, 44.6 percent of Roma communities live in rural areas. The domicile exercises great influence over the life chances of people. While it is understood that the place of residence helps determine the Roma communities’ access to quality of infrastructure, housing, medical and other social services, education, and job opportunities, it is difficult to generalize whether communities in urban areas are better off than those in rural areas. However, there is literature that suggests that spatial segregation of Roma communities has increased in the post-communist period. The concentration of Roma in independent neighborhoods has doubled in the past twenty years both in urban and rural areas.¹⁴ The Roma, compared to the non-Roma, migrate more frequently within a year, and express twice the intent to migrate (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Roma and Non-Roma Migration



Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

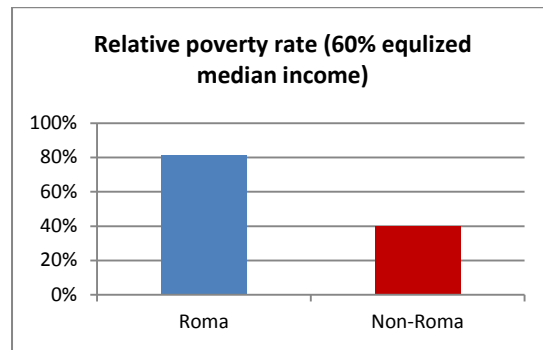
9. **The majority of the Roma in Bulgaria face poverty and exhibit relatively low human development indicators.** Roma are among the poorest in Bulgaria. About 33 percent of the Roma, compared with 5 percent of non-Roma, live in absolute poverty¹⁵ and are also worse off in terms of relative poverty (Figure 1.2). A recent World Bank (WB) and OSI 2010

¹⁴ According to “Strengthening of the Socialist Way of Life among Bulgarian Citizens of Roma Origin” (1980), 49 percent of the Roma in Bulgaria lived in independent neighborhoods. Studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s claim that over three-fourths of the Roma were living in segregated communities.

¹⁵ EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

survey shows that 67 percent of Roma experience net per capita incomes that put them among the poorest 20 percent of people in Bulgaria. A further 19 percent of Roma are among the next poorest 20 percent of people in Bulgaria. A small minority, only 14 percent, have per capita incomes that are equivalent to those experienced by the three upper quintiles.

Figure 1.2: Relative Poverty



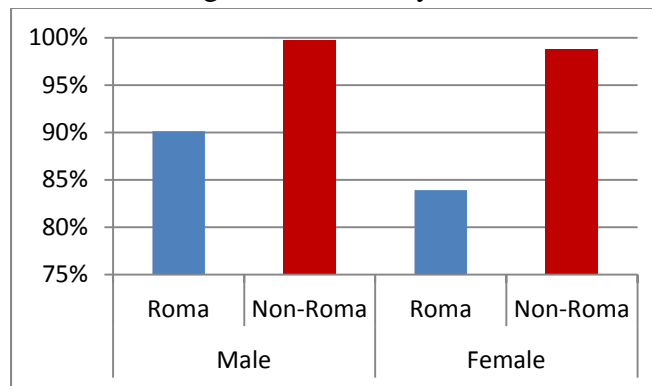
Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

10. **Most of the Roma reside in relatively poor living conditions, with substandard quality of housing, limited dwelling space, and inadequate services.** According to the data, the average Roma household occupies about 18.36 square meters, whereas the average non-Roma household spans 36.00 square meters. The neighborhood questionnaire undertaken among the Roma communities confirm the poor living conditions (described in more detail in Chapter 2).

11. **Literacy rates among the Roma are relatively lower than the non-Roma (Figure 1.3),** with school enrollment rates, as one of the indicators of literacy, showing lower rates consistently across sexes and among age groups, whether it be in the pre-school stage or in the upper secondary education. Some 49 percent of Roma women in Bulgaria have completed less than primary school, and 42 percent only primary education. Only 32 percent of Roma women aged 15-18 are enrolled in formal education. Functional illiteracy is three times higher among Roma women than among Roma men,¹⁶ although according to EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data, about 90 percent of Roma men and 84 percent of Roma women are literate (see Figure 1.3 below). Functional illiteracy is three times more common among Roma women than among Roma men. Equity and inclusion in education is a major development challenge. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss some of the reasons why education remains a challenge.

¹⁶ Government of Bulgaria: National Roma Integration Strategy. Working Draft (2011).

Figure 1.3: Literacy rates



Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

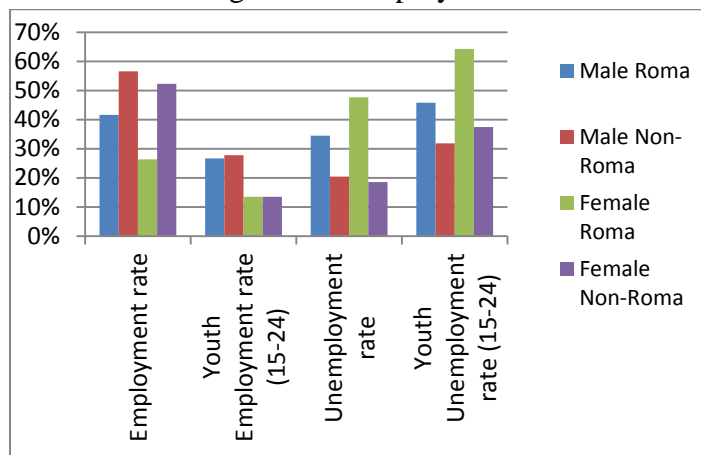
12. In comparison to the non-Roma, the Roma have high unemployment rates and low employment rates. The data (Figure 1.4) shows that Roma women are worse off than both Roma men and non-Roma women. Furthermore, the Roma are most active in the informal sector (Figure 1.5) and in the unskilled and semi-skilled sectors (Figure 1.6). Most Roma are employed in agriculture and forestry, construction, public utilities, mining, and trade (Figure 1.7). Chapter 4 attempts to explain why high unemployment and low employment rates persist. Paragraph 16 describes the impact of the economic transition in Bulgaria on the employment of the Roma.

13. Limited qualifications of Roma men make them less employable.¹⁷ A great proportion of Roma men do not have advanced employment qualifications.¹⁸ Younger men have even lower qualifications—despite slightly longer years spent in school—since the older generation Roma men were able to receive training in the military. According to the EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data, 39 percent of Roma men, compared with 67 percent of non-Roma men, have completed upper secondary school. The limited qualifications of Roma men thus stand in the way of their employment opportunities in the new economy.

¹⁷ While over 90 percent of ethnic Bulgarians complete at least upper secondary education, only 21 percent of the Roma complete upper secondary education, and less than 1 percent of the Roma complete post-secondary education (de Laat and Danchev, 2012).

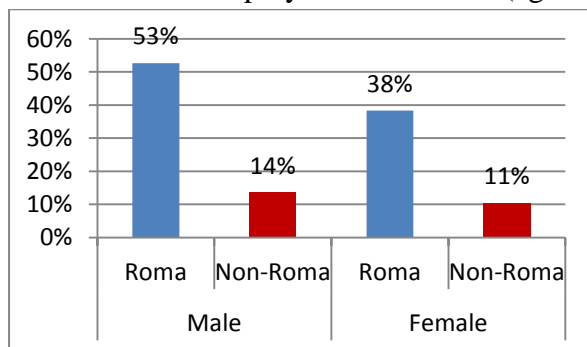
¹⁸ According to the observations of field researchers, this is partially true because Roma men had been able to find employment without having high educational qualifications in the past. According to the EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data, 53 percent of employed Roma, compared with 13 percent of employed non-Roma, worked as unskilled laborers, though disaggregated data for men was unavailable.

Figure 1.4: Employment



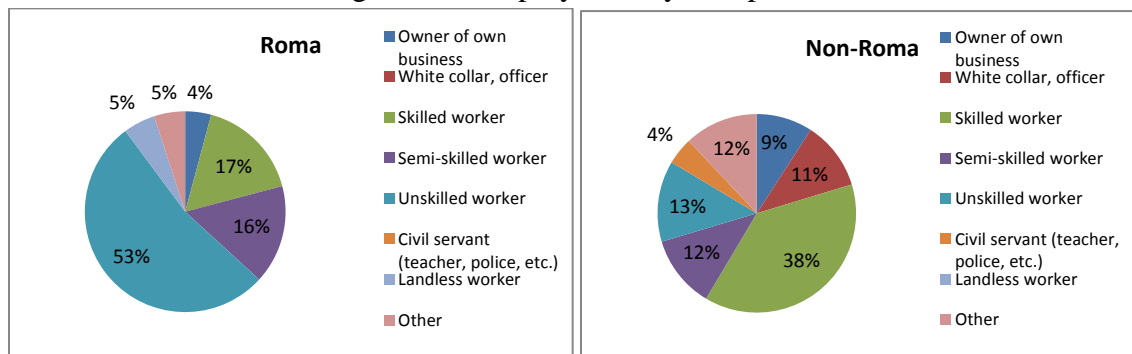
Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

Figure 1.5: Informal employment incidence (ages 15-64)



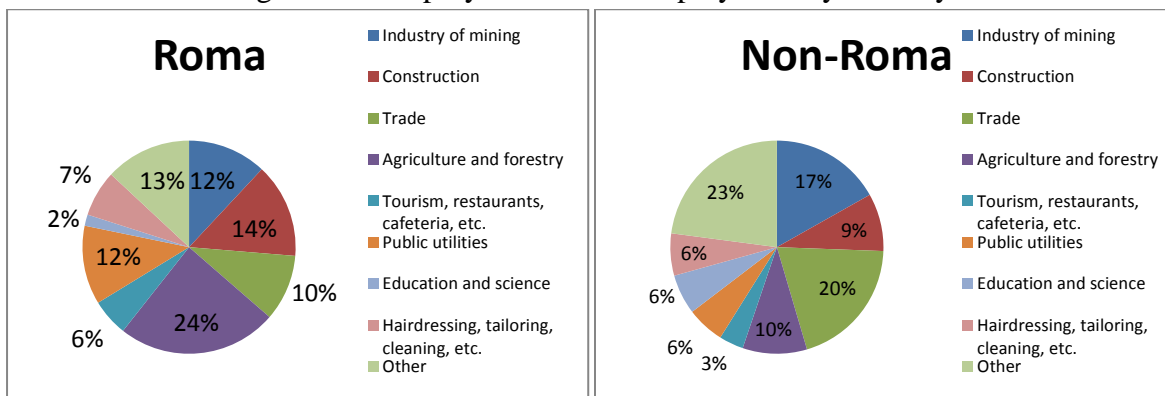
Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

Figure 1.6: Employment by occupation



Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

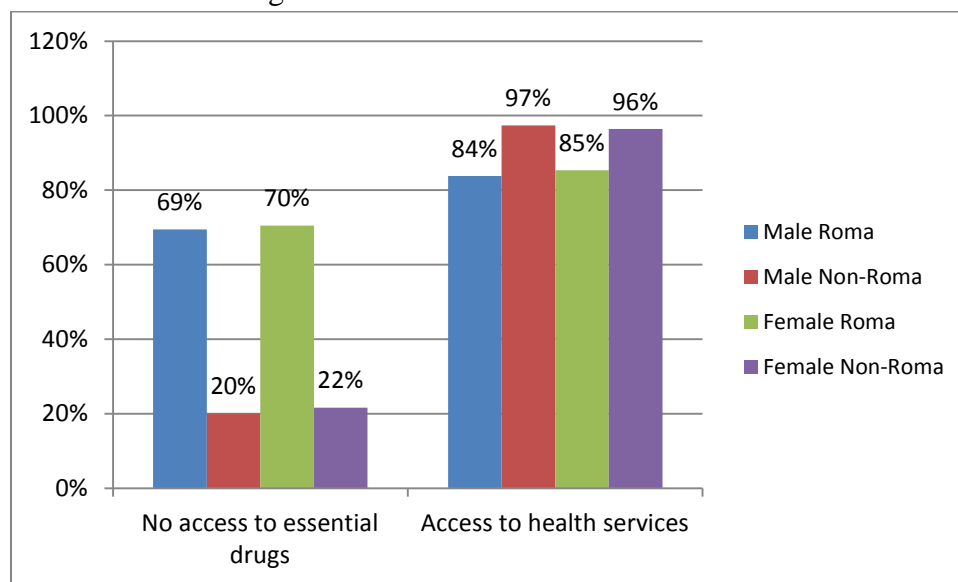
Figure 1.7: Employment and unemployment by industry



Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

14. **The Roma feature acute levels of malnutrition (42 percent) in comparison to the non-Roma (6 percent) and only 85 percent of the Roma--compared with 97 percent of non-Roma--have access to health care.** In terms of access to essential drugs, 70 percent of Roma—compared with 21 percent of non-Roma in Bulgaria—have no access at all (Figure 1.8). Access to health and nutrition remains an urgent area for development intervention.

Figure 1.8: Health Access of the Roma



Source: EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data

15. **The above indicators suggest acute social exclusion of the Roma in Bulgaria.** High rates of poverty, unemployment, low human development indicators, poor living conditions, low quality infrastructure and other services all point to a severe form of social exclusion. Social

exclusion among the Roma has been historically associated with prejudices and stereotypes in Bulgaria. Poverty remains a chronic factor in the exclusion of the Roma, and Roma integration policies in the past have done little to alleviate the disadvantages of the Roma. This study captures some of the effects of exclusion of the Bulgarian Roma through the lens of social norms and gender roles in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

16. **The transition from a planned to a market economy has worsened the overall economic and employment situation of the Roma.** The mass long-term unemployment from the transition severely affected the Roma.¹⁹ The Roma, who were mostly employed in the unskilled sectors of the economy during the communist regime, lost their employment as overall labor in these sectors shrunk abruptly with the advent of pro-market policies. The absence of the right skills, limited social capital, and the prevalence of negative stereotypes and prejudices towards the Roma meant that their integration into the emerging labor class of the Bulgarian society was a huge challenge. Spatial segregation in the post-transition period became more evident and housing conditions deteriorated for the majority of Roma.
17. **In the communities where this study was conducted, respondents noted that most development issues in the Roma neighborhoods are related to unemployment, irregular and low-incomes, and poverty.** Even in Sofia, where the official unemployment rate is the lowest, finding a job is still an incessant challenge. The Roma—who were the last to join en-masse the team of industrial workers, and who traditionally have lower education and qualifications than the ethnic-Bulgarians—were among the first to drop out of the labor market when the need of un-skilled and semi-skilled labor shrunk abruptly. More favorable situations for Roma construction workers lasted until more recently, when the construction boom in Sofia busted immediately following the global financial crisis in 2007. Many Roma men, who were used to working in construction camps and were paid relatively higher salaries, were suddenly left without employment and income. In 2011, the unemployment rate for Roma men was 35 percent, while it was 20 percent for non-Roma men in Bulgaria.
18. **There is a wide perception that Roma women are vulnerable to becoming victims of forced prostitution, trafficking, abuse, and violence, as well as risk early pregnancies and marriages.** Only recently have the EU and the EU member states increased their focus on the particular situation of Roma women and explored their role in promoting inclusion. Principle number five of the EU's 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion notes that effective Roma inclusion policy initiatives need to take into account the needs and circumstances of Roma women and address issues such as multiple discrimination and

¹⁹ Beleva, 2005.

problems of access to social services. In order to address these issues effectively through policy interventions, it is necessary to first analyze the particular situation of Roma women and men. This review must include understanding the challenges the Roma women are facing inside and outside their communities and explore in more detail the root causes of their social exclusion.

19. **The Bulgarian Government adopted a “Framework Program for the Equal Integration of Roma in the Bulgarian Society” in April 1999, the National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, and the National Roma Integration Strategy 2012-2020.** The goal is to create conditions for the equal integration of Roma in the public and economic life. Specifically by ensuring equal opportunities and equal access to rights, benefits, goods and services, participation in all public spheres, and improving quality of life while respecting the principles of equality and non-discrimination. The Strategy has six priority areas: (1) education, (2) health care, (3) living conditions, (4) employment, (5) law supremacy and non-discrimination, and (6) culture and media. The activities within these priority areas will include mutually complementing approaches: (a) integrating the rights, responsibilities, necessities, and the problems of Roma in the general governmental policies (mainstreaming) and ensuring that there is effective equality in the access to social spheres; (b) encouraging positive reactions to inequality in all public domains. Promoting positive public attitudes towards the Roma Community; and (c) having an integrated territorial approach. The territorial principle ensures that simultaneous measures are taken and resources are combined in conformity with various priorities. The approach takes into account the specifics of the particular area (neighborhood, quarter). The Strategy shares ten basic principles on Roma inclusion, adopted by the Council of the EU: (1) constructive, pragmatic, and non-discriminatory policies; (2) explicit, clearly defined, but not exclusive targeting; (3) intercultural approach; (4) integration into the majority group; (5) rising awareness for the gender equality dimension; (6) transfer of evidence-based policies; (7) use of the existing EU instruments; (8) involvement of regional and local authorities; (9) involvement of civil society; and (10) active participation of the Roma.

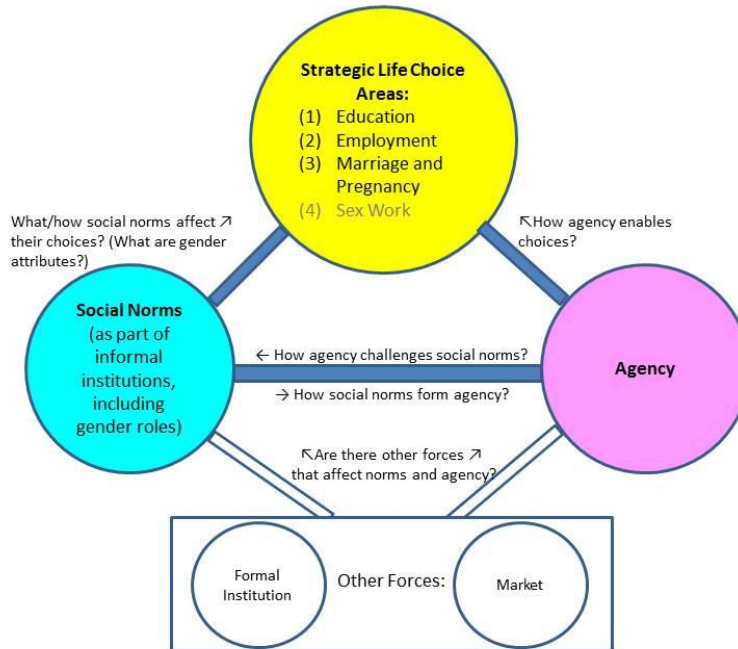
20. **To inform the implementation of their National Strategy for Roma Integration, the Government of Bulgaria wants to increase its understanding of key factors that either contribute to, or impede, social inclusion of the Roma and in particular Roma women.** Over the past decade, the Government of Bulgaria has sought to increase the social integration of the Roma, with a particular focus on non-discrimination measures and improving the Roma’s access to services in the fields of education, health care, housing, and employment. The latest data on the Roma in Bulgaria shows (as detailed above) that these interventions are yet to produce the desired results in promoting social inclusion of the Roma. This study reflects the Government’s interest in finding out if there are big gender disparities and whether women or men are particularly disadvantaged in early childhood education or labor market participation.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework, Approach, and Method

21. **This chapter describes the conceptual framework, the method, and the universe of the research.** It defines the key terms employed in the research and diagrammatically portrays the conceptual framework. These terms have multiple definitions, but this study uses the ones that can be readily applied in the context of the Roma in Bulgaria. This chapter also discusses the scope, limitations, and constraints of the research. The second half of this chapter is dedicated to a general ethnography of the Roma communities that participated in the research. This illustrates the Roma's living conditions, provides the context of the study, and grounds the findings of the research.
22. **The thesis of this study is that social norms and agency influence, to a great degree, the strategic life choices of Roma women and men in the areas of education; employment and pregnancy and marriage.** This study aims to examine how the Roma communities' social norms—including gender roles, and agency—affect strategic life choices in education, employment, pregnancy, and marriage. The study is inspired by the conceptual lens of the 2012 World Development Report (WDR). It is founded on the notion that gender equality outcomes are functions of choices made by men and women, which are influenced by gender roles, social norms, social networks, markets, and the interplay of formal and informal institutions. During the course of the research, this study observed that agency and social norms interact as they shape strategic life choices of the Roma. While the study focuses on informal institutions, it did observe the influence of formal institutions (e.g. social assistance programs) and the market (though the examination of the latter influence is beyond the scope of the study). The figure (Figure 2.1) in the next page attempts to pictorially represent the concept of this study. The box (Box 2.2) following the pictorial representation contains the definitions used in the study.
23. **The central argument of this study, which follows the above thesis, is that the Roma's social inclusion within Bulgarian society is advanced when the Roma are able to make strategic decisions about their life choices in the areas of education; employment; and marriage and pregnancy.** These decisions rely on increased awareness, long-term employment and non-traditional choices in the area of marriage and pregnancy (see discussion in Chapter 4). The research does caution that the correlations are not always direct because of social complexities, and hence the study refrains from making strong or simplistic statements. This and the next chapters discuss the aspects of what facilitates, and what inhibits, such decisions and outcomes. A few key elements of social norms and agency play a critical part in such outcomes, which are described in detail.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Factors influencing the strategic life choices of Roma



Box 2.2: Definitions of concepts (Source: WDR 2012; Turk, Carrie; Petesch, Patti; Muñoz Boudet, Ana Maria. 2010.)

Agency: Individual’s (or group’s) ability to make effective choices and the process through which women and men use their endowments and take advantage of opportunities to achieve desired outcomes.

Formal Institutions: All aspects that pertain to the functioning of the state, including laws, regulatory frameworks, and mechanisms for the delivery of services that the state provides.

Gender roles: Provide guides to normative behaviors for each sex within certain social contexts.

Informal Institutions: The mechanisms, rules, and procedures that shape social interactions but do not pertain to the functioning of the state.

Markets: A variety of arrangements that allow buyers and sellers to exchange (the rights over) any type of goods and services subject to a set of rules.

Social Norms: Social norms refer to patterns of behavior that flow from socially shared beliefs and are enforced by informal social sanctions.

Strategic Life Choices: Choices that can be critical in determining the life one lives and the life one wants to live. These choices are subjective and reflect individual preferences and interests, but are also formulated within specific contexts and constraints.

24. **Understanding the agency of Roma men and women is instrumental in determining the nature and type of policy and operational interventions that are likely to be successful in facilitating inclusion.** This study attempts to generate a better understanding of the

Roma's ability to make strategic life choices, make decisions, and control resources. The focus on endowments of education and employment, as well as strategic choices relating to marriage, provides for a concrete understanding of how agency, along with social norms, interact in Roma society. Agency both enables and determines strategic life choices (analyzed in Chapter 4). Moreover, choices that are made in the three areas are not necessarily free nor do they promote social inclusion in the mainstream society, but are instead influenced by contexts and constraints, including those imposed by social norms.

25. **Social inclusion is a two way street between the Roma and the majority community. Research sheds some light on the reasons why certain Roma communities are more included into mainstream society than others.** This study does not assume that increased supply and accessibility of social services to the Roma automatically results in increased use of such services by them and, therefore, leads to their better integration into mainstream society. Instead, this study analyzes the factors that influence Roma's ability to make strategic life choices and how this, in turn, affects access to (as opposed to accessibility to) social services for fulfilling basic human needs. This study will try to reveal some of the reasons, for example, that hinder Roma girls from staying in school, why marrying early is preferred over a marriage at an older age, or why (younger) Roma women are less likely to be employed.
26. **Roma society features great social complexities.** Though this study did not analyze all of them, it focuses on social factors that have overt and manifest impacts on gender roles. A thorough investigation of the Roma requires a high degree of anthropological depth with elaborate investments in building rapport, which this study did not have the benefit of. The focused nature of the research, however, meant using strategic methodological tools to understand the social patterns of the Roma that assisted in their social inclusion. This study expects that consecutive studies can build upon this investigation, expanding sample coverage and using additional tools such as participant observation. This would assist in making more robust generalizations.
27. **This study employs a participatory diagnostic instrument in its investigation** of (a) how life choices of the Roma are influenced by the decisions made (or not made) by Roma women and men (agency), (b) what particular preferences, level of bargaining power, incentives, or constraints determine these decisions; and (c) what particular aspects of gender roles and social norms affect their preferences and the levels of bargaining power. The findings of the participatory diagnostics are analyzed in relation to the three strategic life choices of Roma women and men in the areas of education, employment, early marriage and pregnancy, and in effect the level of social inclusion of the respective communities.
28. **Qualitative information is collected at the community and household levels through three activities:** (i) a neighborhood questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions with

one or two key informants; (ii) six different Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women and men of different generations and (iii) a mini case study.²⁰ The activities were designed to reveal as much as possible about the internal structure of the households and communities, the relationship dynamics, the roles within the household and the community, the role of men and women, and how they affect agency. In addition to the above interviews, approximately 10 interviews were conducted with key informants—including Government officials, academics, and Roma students—to gain understanding of other factors that may contribute to the level of social inclusion and gender equality of the Roma people, particularly related to the three strategic life choice areas. The key findings of this study and preliminary policy recommendations were reported back to the four neighborhoods in July 2013. The findings and recommendations presented in this report reflect the feedback received at the July 2013 FGDs.

29. **The research ensured that survey questions avoided prevailing stereotypes of, and prejudices against, the Roma.** The questions relating to strategic life choices around marriage, crime, exploitation, prostitution, and trafficking were sensitive in nature, and the survey team ensured that none of the questions were either intrusive or disrespectful. As a result, following the pilot survey, the survey team concluded that the survey tools did not generate hard information on vulnerability to crime, exploitation, prostitution and trafficking, which led to it being dropped as one of the areas for investigation. In the area of marriage and pregnancy, many survey questions were either rephrased or removed because they were too sensitive or implied prejudice based on stereotypes of the Roma. Researchers invested great time to build rapport and garner a nuanced and thorough understanding of these issues. The study neither had access to the necessary resources nor the time to explore these areas to the fullest extent. The study did, however, gather ample information (represented and analyzed in this study) which expands the boundaries of knowledge on the Bulgarian Roma communities in these three areas.
30. **This study promotes the Roma perceptions of themselves and the society surrounding them.** This is in the methodological tradition of Turk, Carrie; Petesch, Patti; Muñoz Boudet, Ana Maria. 2010.; Narayan et.al. (2000, 2007, 2009, 2010) within the World Bank, and which is indeed well-established within social anthropology. This study quotes the voices of the Roma, translated into English from the Roma language and Bulgarian, to provide context as well as articulate the realities from the ground. This study is further based on a small

²⁰ In each of the four communities, qualitative information was collected through: (i) community questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions which one or two key informants completed; (ii) six FGDs with men and women of different generations (age groups 14-16, 18-24, and 40-60), and (iii) mini case studies on issues that triggered additional discussions.

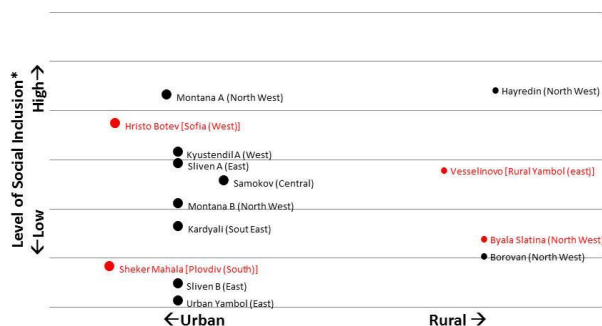
sample of the Roma, and is neither representative of the Roma population of Bulgaria, nor the full range of issues that the Bulgarian Roma encounter because of its gender focus on three areas. Hence, the limited quantitative information collected in the four communities represented in chapters 3 and 4 must be viewed in its context and with caution against generalization.

31. **The research deliberately undertook a mix of urban and rural communities, regional representation, and degree of geographical isolation.** The four Roma communities selected for the study were in the urban neighborhoods of the cities of Sofia and Plovdiv, and in the rural neighborhoods of Yambol and Byala Slatina. These communities were selected to cover (a) a good range of neighborhoods representing seemingly varying degrees of social inclusion; (b) both urban and rural neighborhoods; and (c) different geographical areas of the country (see the Map and Figure 2.3 below). The selection of the four neighborhoods, out of others listed in the figure below, was additionally influenced by the survey team’s level of rapport and access, which was not continuous throughout the entire area. The study selects two urban and two rural communities exhibiting different levels of social inclusion (See Figure 2.3 below) based on consultations with Roma experts, government, and non-government agencies. The extent of social exclusion is examined in terms of disadvantages experienced by the Roma women and men, especially in the three strategic life choices areas.



Figure 2.3: Roma Neighborhoods

Roma Neighborhoods



*Assessment of the level of social inclusion is based on a combined estimated guess of the levels of early education enrollment rate, early marriage/pregnancy, and preservation of traditional values and customs.
Neighborhoods in red denote the selected neighborhoods for this study.

32. **Hristo Botev (Sofia).** Hristo Botev, the Roma neighborhood in Sofia, is situated in the southwest of the city. It features a sizeable Roma population and is relatively well integrated with urban Sofia. According to the NSI, the educational level of those who have identified themselves as Roma in Sofia is higher than those across the country. Thus, 18.9 percent of the Roma in Sofia have attended secondary or higher education, 42.7 percent of the Roma have attended lower secondary (up to the eighth grade), and 34.1 percent have attended primary (up to fourth grade) education. Similarly, employment among the Roma in Sofia, stands at 38.6 percent.
33. **The economic situation in the neighborhood appears to have suffered a drastic decline since 1989, particularly after the construction boom busted in 2007.** Before 1989, the majority of men in the neighborhood worked in industries, and the majority of women were employed in pharmaceutical and textile industries. Some men worked in a metal factory and a minority of women made leather dresses. Others, particularly those without formal education, worked on a cooperative farm. Many men worked in construction during the weekends and holidays to obtain additional income. Construction workers received incomes in the range of Leva 3,000 - 4,000 (approximately US\$ 2,000-2,700) on a monthly basis during the construction boom that lasted between 2001 and 2007. Around the same time (2001), many in the neighborhood started to take out loans with high interest rates from money lenders in the neighborhoods. However, with the collapse of the construction boom in 2007, many suffered massive losses from insolvent loans. Many in the community mentioned that only 10 percent of the population was able to maintain its income level post-1989. According to them, these were political brokers associated with money lenders and middlemen, scrap metal traders, and small shop or coffee shop owners.
34. **There appear to be tensions between two groups of the Roma: those who have been residents in the neighborhood for generations, and those that have arrived in the last decade from other regions of Bulgaria.** The former complain of the newcomers for

bringing bad habits and behaviors to the neighborhood. The latter are often blamed for aggressive behavior, fights, vandalism, and criminal behavior in the neighborhood. According to the older residents, the increased population pressure is associated with deterioration in public infrastructure and public hygiene. The original population characterizes the newcomers as those having large households (e.g. 20 to 30 persons residing in one house), being loud (e.g. they listen to loud music), more prone to alcoholism, and associated with criminal activities such as drug dealing and prostitution. The older residents claim that there were no pimps, drugs, or prostitution prior to their arrival, and that children's playgrounds were clean and intact.

Figure 2.4: Key Neighborhood Information for Hristo Botev, based on estimates from the neighborhood questionnaire

| | |
|---|---|
| Neighborhood | Hristo Botev |
| Population | 8,000-9000 |
| Ethnic Subgroups | Mixed, Djorevtsi |
| Neighborhood History | Very old. Neighborhood built by ethnic Bulgarians and Roma from Vratsa and Kostenetz. Grandparents came from villages near Sofia. Roma and Bulgarians of same villages came and bought land. Cultural hall built in 1938. Neighborhood became bigger in the 50s and 70s, and after the 90s when many came from all over the countries. |
| Economic Trends | Between 40-80% of population poor now. Almost no one was poor in 1989. Neighborhood is less prosperous compared to 2001 and 1989. 2001-started the construction boom—3000-4000 leva monthly income for construction workers. About 5% receive social allowance, about 15% receive heating benefits, about 5-10% receive literacy and vocational training. |
| Distance to City Centers | Center of the city: 2-3km; Government offices: 1km |
| Social Service Facilities | Preschool or nursery school, Elementary school (grades 1-4), Primary school (grades 5-7), Secondary school (grades 8-12), Public health center or clinic, Job training or vocational programs. 100% electricity connection, 80% piped water and sewage connection. |
| ICT | Cellular Phone: almost everyone; internet: almost everyone |
| Boy's education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); all complete primary school (grades 5-7); majority complete secondary school. |
| Girls' education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); majority complete primary school (grades 5-7); less than half complete secondary school. |
| Employment (men) | Now: Able to find if help is available/ difficult; 2001: easy to find; 1989: easy to find. Now 50% (60-70% work), 2001, about 80% worked, before 1989, 100% or 99%. Now, common jobs are taxi drivers, construction works, but much less. Community services. Security firms. Musicians. Younger men work in restaurants, gas stations, small shops. 2001, construction workers, 1989, metal factory, and qualified work in the industry. |
| Employment (women) | Now: Majority of women work for pay. 2001, some or majority worked for pay. 1989, almost all worked for pay. |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Men | Now 300-600 leva (1,000 leva if taxi driver); In 2001, 3000-4000 leva in construction sector. Before 1989, metal workers earned high salary, otherwise salary was not high, but purchasing power was greater. |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Women | Now 200-300 levas. In 2001, 200-300 for genitors, 800 for restaurants, 350-400 textile workers |
| Migration | About 10-15% of families have at least one man working abroad, mainly in construction but also as drivers and in hotels. 5-10%, Greece, Italy, Spain. Agriculture, Construction, and Industrial plants. More difficult for women to find job abroad than in Bulgaria because they are unqualified (but for unqualified jobs, easier). About 15% of families have women abroad, engaged in agriculture, taking care of elderly, restaurants, hotels; about 20%, mainly Greece, Italy and Spain. Many women working as prostitutes. Very few as beggars. Often pimps are their husbands. There are pimps from the neighborhood that traffick girls from villages to Ukrainian and Albanian pimps. |
| Age of Marriage | Now: Men: 20-23; Women 16-20. 2001: Men: 18-20; Women 14-17. 1989: Men 17-20; Women 13-16. |
| Women's age at birth of 1st chld | Now: 20-22; 2001: 17-18; 1989: 15-18. |
| Use of Contraceptives | 50-60% use spirals, older women still use abortion, condoms only used by prostitutes. |
| Stealing of women for marriage | No direct response. Some women are prostitutes. |
| Crime and Violence | Now, on a weekly basis. In 2001, on a daily basis. In 1989, not very frequent (only few times a year) |

35. **Sheker Mahala (Plovdiv).** In Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city situated in the south central region of the country, the Roma concentrate in areas of the city called Stolipinovo and Sheker Mahala. While some parts of the population identify as Roma, others self-identify as Turks or Millets. Sheker Mahala is not well-integrated into Plovdiv, like other urban Roma concentrations in the region, and behaves like an island. According to the NSI data, the concentration of Roma in the region of Plovdiv is lower than the average for the country, but it is among the steadily growing Roma concentrations in Bulgaria in the last two decades. The education levels of those who identify as Roma and Turks are lower than the average for Bulgaria. The employment rate for self-identified Roma in Plovdiv, according to NSI data, is 22.4 percent while the registered unemployment rate stands at 14.7 percent. About 63 percent of the Plovdiv Roma between the ages of 15 and 64 remain economically inactive.
36. **Sheker Mahala is an old Roma neighborhood founded in 1920 by the Roma who then lived in the center of Plovdiv.** However, ethnic Bulgarians have steadily replaced them in the center, pushing all the Roma to Sheker Mahala. The Roma claim that they left the city center when refugees and ethnic Bulgarians from Macedonia arrived in Plovdiv, and forced them out. According to them, Roma and ethnic Bulgarian children went to the same school until around 1992, when many ethnic Bulgarians started sending their children to other schools that did not have Roma children. Since then, however, significant developments—such as the construction of new apartment buildings through EU funding and the demolition of walls that used to segregate the Roma neighborhood from the rest of the city—have occurred. According to the respondents, there is an increase in women prostitution since 2001. According to the majority of the residents, the neighborhood is calm with occasional quarrels between families.

Figure 2.5: Key Neighborhood Information for Sheker Mahala, based on estimates from the neighborhood questionnaire

| | |
|---|--|
| Neighborhood | Sheker Mahala |
| Population | 8,000-9,000 |
| Ethnic Subgroups | Holohane Roma (Millet) The majority are muslims. Evangelical Church arrived recently. Some identify as Turks for prestige, but not really accepted. |
| Neighborhood History | Founded in 1920 by Roma who lived in the center of Plovdiv, when refugees and Bulgarians from Macedonia entered Plovdiv. Children were studying in the same school, but since 1992, many Bulgarians started sending their children to other schools. |
| Economic Trends | About 80% of population poor now. About 40% poor in 2001, 15% poor in 1989. More prosperous compared to 2001, less prosperous compared to 1989, when almost all had a job and only about 1-5% were poor. People are struck by the economic crisis, and the accession to EU gave them the opportunity to work abroad. Better educated people and those who had more initiatives were less affected by the crisis. Very small part took advantage of changes and became political brokers. About 45% receive social allowance, about 45% receive heating benefits. |
| Distance to City Centers | Center of the city: 5km; Government offices: 5km |
| Social Service Facilities | Preschool or nursery school, Elementary school (grades 1-4), Primary school (grades 5-7), Private health center or clinic. No Secondary school (grades 8-12), no job training or vocational programs. 100% of population have access to electricity connection, most to piped water, and about half to sewage connection. |
| ICT | Cellular Phone: most; internet: less than half of neighborhood |
| Boys' education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); most complete primary school (grades 5-7); very few complete secondary school. |
| Girls' education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); most complete primary school (grades 5-7); very few complete secondary school. |
| Employment (men) | Now: difficult to find; 2001: difficult to find. Now 50% work, 2001, about 50% worked, before 1989, 80%. Now, common unskilled work is construction. Many engaged in sales of cigarettes, clothes, and goods from Turkey. Many men work as porter, some with horses and carts. Small part of men are engaged in small other types of activities. With better education, taxi drivers and industrial enterprises. Before, many worked in sugar factories and food processing. |
| Employment (women) | Women rarely work for pay (10%). Before 1989, about half of women who did not have to take care of children were working. Available types for work for women now include street cleaning, but many are kept in the house until they marry. After marriage, they do not work or work in the same place where husband works (restaurant). |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Men | Now 300-350 leva; In 2001, 200-250 leva. Before 1989, 90-120 leva equivalent (considering inflation). |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Women | No estimate available. |
| Migration | About 60% of families have a man working abroad, mainly in Belgium, Spain, Netherlands, Austria where there are many Turkish population. No % of women working abroad available. There are prostitutes and pimps, but not that many. |
| Age of Marriage | Now: Men: 18; Women 15. 2001: Men: 17; Women 14. 1989: Men 17; Women 15. |
| Women's age at birth of 1st child | Now: 15-16; 2001: 15-16; 1989: 15-16. |
| Use of Contraceptives | Health mediators since 2005 provide some health education. 5% of women use modern contraceptives. Many have abortions. |
| Stealing of women for marriage | No. Girls agree to marry. |
| Crime and Violence | Now, on a monthly basis. In 2001, on a monthly basis. |

37. **Byala Slatina.** Byala Slatina is situated in the rural and economically lagging northwestern region of Bulgaria, also known as the Vratsa region. The Roma settlement is distinct from other neighborhoods in the city, and there are two Roma subgroups: tin-smiths (Kalaydzhii) and mat-weavers (Reshetari). Kalaydzhii appear to be more integrated than Reshetari, who observe traditional norms more rigidly. According to the NSI data, about 22 percent of the Roma in the Vratsa region (between 20 and 60 years old) have attended secondary or higher secondary school and 28 percent have either attended primary or lower primary school. Employment stands at 18.5 percent, unemployment is 22 percent, and 59.5 percent of the Roma in Byala Slatina are economically inactive.
38. **The vast majority of residents describe themselves as extremely poor and believe they were better off during the communist regime.** Respondents mentioned that only 10 families have sufficient income to get by, while the rest struggle to make ends meet. Almost all residents in Byala Slatina were nostalgic for the communist period when they said everyone was happy; there was equal pay for equal work; and children, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds, attended the same school. They recalled that before the collapse of communism in 1989, all citizens worked together, shared the same public spaces, schools, and doctors. Interviewees believed that the economic situation drastically declined after 1989, the factories and industries closed down and young Roma lost contact and social capital with ethnic-Bulgarians. This placed a strain on the relationships between the Roma and their ethnic Bulgarian colleagues and friends. Some argued that the Kalaydzhii Roma were better at coping with the transition because of the tighter social ties they had nurtured with ethnic-Bulgarians.
39. **The Byala Slatina Roma communities argue that those who started their own businesses soon after communist period became better off in the 1990s.** A small number of these entrepreneurs bought apartments in other neighborhoods of town and began living among ethnic-Bulgarians. Most other successful Roma were employed abroad around 2000, when there was a mass migration. This was a period when Bulgaria's economy was in a poor state. Similar to Hristo Botev, however, many families in Byala Slatina suffer from indebtedness. The loans they borrowed beginning 2001,--especially in 2005-2006--have become increasingly difficult to repay since 2008, because of the effects of the international financial crisis. The Roma community in Byala Slatina believes that more of them work abroad now, and that their level of education has improved 2001. They perceive that their well-being is similar to the non-Roma minority and certain ethnic Bulgarian neighborhoods in the area.

Figure 2.6: Key Neighborhood Information for Byala Slatina, based on estimates from the neighborhood questionnaire

| | |
|---|--|
| Neighborhood | Byala Slatina |
| Population | 2,200 |
| Ethnic Subgroups | Kalayzdhi, Reshetari |
| Neighborhood History | 150-200 years |
| Economic Trends | About 200 people have permanent jobs. 40-50 people receive minimum wage for care of disabled people. More prosperous compared to 2001, less prosperous compared to 1989, when almost all had a job and only about 1-5% were poor. |
| Distance to City Centers | Center of the city: 1km; Government offices: 1km |
| Social Service Facilities | Preschool, elementary school (grades 1-4), Church/mosque/temple. Electricity for all, piped water for all, and sewage system for 80%. These services are reliable. No primary school (grades 5-7), No secondary school, No public health center or clinic. |
| ICT | Cellular Phone: almost everyone; internet: about half of neighborhood |
| Boy's education | 100% elementary school completion (grades 1-4); 75% primary school completion (grades 5-7); 50% secondary school completion. |
| Girls' education | 100% elementary school completion (grades 1-4); 85% primary school completion (grades 5-7); 45% secondary school completion. |
| Employment (men) | Now: Able to find if help is available/ difficult; 2001: difficult to find; 1989: easy to find. Construction is the most common type of employment now. In 2001, there was no work and people migrated abroad in mass. In 1989, the town was industrious with economic activities in metal works, textiles, and processed food. Those without education took care of animal in cooperatives or had other agricultural work. |
| Employment (women) | Now: Able to find if help is available/ difficult; 2001: difficult to find; 1989: easy to find. Now, the majority work in textile industry, processing fruits, and tobacco growing. In 2001, the majority were unemployed, or were assisting family, receiving social assistance. 1989, textile, industrial enterprises, many dairy industry. Women never worked in unqualified sector before—worked in offices in white-collar work. Now they work in any sector, including tobacco farms. All women here are used to work for generations (Kalayzdhi). |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Men | Now: construction—400 leva per month, in other big cities, around 1000, which is half of what they were receiving in 2008. In 2001, 100 leva. |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Women | Now: 150-300 leva in textile industry + 60 leva worth of coupons for food, 10 levas per day for tobacco fields (12-14 hours a day). 2001: salaries were lower. Textile workers were receiving below minimum wage, just enough not to starve. |
| Migration | Around 100 men work in Sofia and Varna in construction. About 130 work abroad. About 50% of families have someone working abroad, but is increasingly more difficult. They mostly work in Spain, Italy, Cyprus, and Greece. Before 2009, about 80% of families had at least 1 member working abroad. Many women follow their husbands to work abroad. Women usually work in restaurants and hotels, taking care of old people or engaged in agriculture. Now more women are working than men abroad. |
| Age of Marriage | Now: Men: 21-22; Women 17-20. 2001: Men: 21-22; Women 17-18. 1989: Men 17; Women 15. |
| Women's age at birth of 1st child | Now: 20-22; 2001: 19-20; 1989: 16-17. |
| Use of Contraceptives | Minimal. Many abortions. Majority not covered by insurance and only visit doctors when sick or want abortion. |
| Stealing of women for marriage | No cases. Before 1989, there were some cases in which young couples eloped to avoid arranged marriage with unwanted partners. There are 2-3 pimps in the town now who traffic girls. |
| Crime and Violence | Now, on a weekly basis. In 2001, on a daily basis. In 1989, not very frequent (only few times a year) |

40. **Vesselinovo (Yambol).** The Roma community in the village of **Vesselinovo**, part of the Yambol Region located in southeastern Bulgaria, is a poor rural Roma community that has not integrated with the country. Among Roma population, Yambol ranks third in the country, and the number of the Roma is steadily growing. During the 1992 census, 3.8 percent of the population in Yambol self-identified as Roma. In 2011, that number jumped to 8.5 percent. The level of education of the Roma in Yambol is lower than the Roma average in Bulgaria: 60.4 percent of 20-60 year old Roma have not attended school, have dropped out of school in the first years, or have received primary education at most. Most of them are functionally illiterate. The share of employed Roma is 19.24 percent, which is close to the national average for the Roma; but the share of the unemployed is 31.48 percent, which is much higher than the national average for the Roma of 19.35 percent (NSI 2011). The Roma in this region do not own land. They rely on sporadic agricultural jobs and collect plastic waste for recycling.

Figure 2.7: Key Neighborhood Information for Vesselinovo, based on estimates from the neighborhood questionnaire

| | |
|---|---|
| Neighborhood | Vesselinovo |
| Population | 402 |
| Ethnic Subgroups | Eastern Orthodox Christians or Evangelists. Now increasingly more Evangelists. |
| Neighborhood History | In the 1960s, 10 families bought some land from local peasants and built their houses. Since 1989, more Roma from Yambol arrived, and lands were given to them by local authorities. |
| Economic Trends | About 70% of population poor now. About 40% poor in 2001, 15% poor in 1989. Less prosperous compared to 2001 and 1989, when about 40% and 6% of population were poor, respectively. Almost all suffered after the closure of the cooperative farm. In 1993, after the closure of the cement factory, and after the closure of greenhouses, and livestock farms. Sweets factory were also closed. About 80% receive social allowance, about 60% receive heating benefits, and about 10% receive literacy or vocational training. |
| Distance to City Centers | Center of the city: 7-8km; Government offices: 7-8km |
| Social Service Facilities | Preschool or nursery school, Elementary school (grades 1-4), Primary school (grades 5-7), Private health center or clinic. No Secondary school (grades 8-12), no job training or vocational programs. 100% of population have access to electricity connection and piped water, but no one is connected to the sewerage system. |
| ICT | Cellular Phone: about half of neighborhood; internet: less than half of neighborhood |
| Boys' education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); all complete primary school (grades 5-7); very few complete secondary school. |
| Girls' education | All complete elementary school (grades 1-4); all complete primary school (grades 5-7); very few complete secondary school. |
| Employment (men) | Now: difficult to find; 2001: able to find work with help; 1989: easy to find work. Now 10% work. In 2001, about 40% worked, before 1989, 100%. Now, during the summer, they help Bulgarian neighbors with field work and housework when someone calls them. They collect scrap metal and recyclable plastic, take care of a animal for subsistence. Before 1993, all of them worked, without unemployment |
| Employment (women) | Women rarely work for pay (8%). In 2001, some women worked. Before 1989, almost all of women were working. Many work as janitors and agricultural workers. Many receive social assistance for taking care of the sick. Before, they worked in agricultural cooperatives. |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Men | Now 80-90 leva; In 2001, 150 leva. |
| Average Monthly Wage of Unskilled Women | Now 200 leva; In 2001, 200 leva. |
| Migration | No men work abroad. One family has a woman working in Greece, in a fish market. |
| Age of Marriage | Now: Men: 17; Women 13. 2001: Men: 17; Women 13. 1989: Men 17; Women 13. |
| Women's age at birth of 1st child | Now: 14; 2001: 14; 1989: 14. |
| Use of Contraceptives | Minimal. Many abortions. Majority not covered by insurance and only visit doctors when sick or want abortion. |
| Stealing of women for marriage | 2-3 reported in the last 10 years |
| Crime and Violence | Now, on a weekly basis. In 2001, on a monthly basis. In 1989, never (only few times a year). According to the mayor, some steal agricultural products, metals, cable, wood from the forest, but according to the neighbors they don't steal. |

41. **The specific histories and descriptions of the four Roma communities reveal the social and economic diversities among the Roma.** The following two chapters will show that Roma society is not without its share of internal contradictions and paradoxes, like any other

society. This study provides glimpses of these while discussing the social complexities of Roma society, particularly around norms and agency. The communities surveyed were different from each other, and differences existed within the same communities (e.g. across generations, locations (rural or urban), extent of education, employment, command of Bulgarian²¹, and economic well-being). The research finds that there are social complexities that cannot be readily understood and deciphered within the time and research constraints, but that these need to be looked into to better understand how policies can better address the challenges facing the Roma.

²¹ The Roma in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev speak Bulgarian fluently, and a good number even speak it at home. The Roma in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo typically do not have a strong command of Bulgarian.

Chapter 3: Gender Roles and Social Norms in the Four Communities

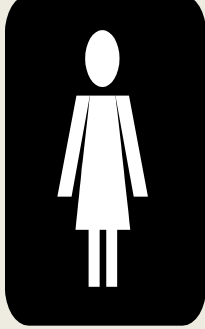
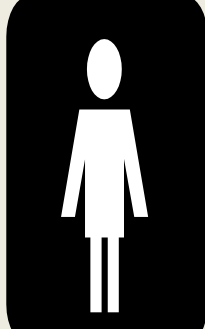
42. **This chapter discusses key gender roles as part of the Roma social norms in the four communities and the interaction between the roles.** It analyses how these roles are shifting in light of the changing economic and social realities. This chapter begins with a discussion of the normative framework that defines the gender roles. This section then selectively looks at how some of the most defining elements of these gender roles are transferring from one generation to the next and how they interact with the influence of Bulgarian society. It describes the conflict between the traditional and modern roles, and how they shape interactions between the sexes and family members. These internal social dynamics, while demonstrating that Roma communities are going through a period of significant transformation, also set the stage for the discussion (in the Chapter 4) of how changing gender roles affect the agency of each gender, which in turn transforms traditional gender roles and plays a significant part in the determination of strategic life choices.

3.1 The Normative Framework for Gender Roles and Social Norms

43. **In the four communities, social norms for what constitutes a “good wife” or a “good husband” are similar and strongly rooted in traditional values.**²² A “good wife” is defined as someone who has mostly domestic responsibilities and handles them well. A good wife takes care of the family and the home. She looks after the children, cooks, cleans, and maintains the house. All four communities define a good wife as someone who respects, supports, and obeys her husband and is faithful to him. When asked to compare today’s good wife to a previous generation’s, respondents observed that women used to be more patient and obedient to their husbands; whereas now, particularly in Hristo Botev (the urban Roma neighborhood), women seem to prioritize their own needs over patience and obedience to the husband. Across all four communities, a key attribute of a “good husband,” over and above all other attributes, is the ability to provide for the family. Male and female respondents repeatedly described the good husband as: “works hard,” “brings money home,” and “looks for (any kind of) jobs.” Other characteristics of the good husband are summed up: “is responsible,” “does not drink or gamble,” “cares for his family and children,” and “does not beat his wife.” Female respondents from the urban Hristo Botev, aged between 18 to 24 years, mentioned that a good husband “helps with the children and domestic work.”

²² The FGDs’ descriptions of a “good wife” and “good husband” reflect the groups’ most idealized views of gender roles and social norms. These do not necessarily reflect the reality in their daily lives as the following sections will reveal.

Figure 3.1: Characteristics of a good wife and husband

| A good wife | A good husband |
|---|---|
|  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ has a good relationship with her husband ➤ loves her husband and takes care of him ➤ listens to her husband (obeys him), respects him, and abides by his will ➤ does not cheat on her husband and does not make him jealous; ➤ must be fertile to have children ➤ is a caring mother ➤ helps her daughters-in-law in the raising of her grandchildren |  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ provides for the family/takes care of the family ➤ works hard ➤ brings money home ➤ looks for (any kind of) jobs ➤ is not lazy ➤ does not beat his wife ➤ does not drink a lot of alcohol ➤ does not gamble ➤ does not cheat |

Source: Focus Group Discussions

44. **Norms around being a “good girl” or a “good boy” mirror the social norms around being a “good wife” or a “good husband” respectively.** Responses from adolescent FGDs across all four communities are consistent in describing a “good girl” and “good boy.” A good girl is respectful and obedient to her parents, helps out with childcare and domestic activities. She does not date boys. Attending school regularly is an important element of being a good girl for the majority of female respondents in the four communities, with the exception of the Reshetari respondents in the rural Byala Slatina neighborhood and the male adolescents in urban Hristo Botev. The most commonly mentioned feature of a bad girl was promiscuity, followed by being lazy, not helping at home, and not attending school. The discussion of features of a “good” versus “bad” boy mostly focused on anti-social behavior—being aggressive, violent, stealing, drinking, using banned drugs, and gambling. Good boys were typically defined as the antithesis of all bad boy behaviors—“works hard” (duly emphasized in Byala Slatina and Vesselinovo), “respects and supports his father or parents” (salient across all communities), and “goes to school” (mentioned in all communities). The Kalaydzhih girls from Byala Slatina also said that a good boy helps out with domestic work.

45. **While traditional gender roles are largely intact and similar across the four communities, there is a disconnect between stated values and actions.** FGDs about what constitutes a “good wife” and a “good husband” convey the most idealized views of gender roles and norms in these communities. Their views did not necessarily reflect the realities of their daily lives nor the aspirations they have for their lives in the future. In fact, once

discussions went deeper into the subject matter, discussants often talked about situations where gender roles and social norms are under considerable stress. While proclaimed social norms (i.e. gender roles) are strongly rooted in tradition, the gap between these traditional norms and the reality is widening. The findings from the qualitative research show an increasing influence from mainstream society; however, it is difficult to fully assess to what extent these values are internalized and practiced. The FGDs did not provide clarity about which values are socially more desirable, more acceptable, or more practiced.²³ The Roma in all the four communities seem to be caught, in varying degrees, between traditional values and the reality of modern times.

3.2 Changing Gender Roles across the Roma Communities

- 46. Some of the striking changes around gender norms in the Roma communities include: gender equality and the notion that men are superior to women; the role of men as the providers; and the virginity of women before marriage.** The study observed that Roma communities are struggling to reconcile traditional gender norms with what is increasingly practiced in the Roma communities. Communities are responding differently to the changes, and this study captures how they impact strategic decision making, as discussed in the next chapter. The responses depended on external socioeconomic influences, levels of education, and interactions with the wider Bulgarian society. The following sections will analyze how gender norms are being tackled by individuals and their communities.
- 47. Overwhelmingly, male and female FGDs across all four communities considered men to be traditionally “superior” to, and “above” women.** In the communities of Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, traditional gender norms (i.e. men being in charge of all decision making and women solely responsible for domestic work)_are more entrenched and religiously maintained. Working outside the household is not socially desirable for most women as long as the husband is able to provide sufficient income for the family.

²³ As stated in Chapter 2, if extensive fieldwork research were to be combined with FGDs, it might generate greater clarity on these issues.

48. **Given the traditional values around the status and role of men and women in the four Roma communities, discussions about gender equality were difficult, in particular with male FGD participants.** The difficulties often started with the term equality, which was continuously replaced in discussions with the concept of “understanding.” Discussions showed that Roma men often felt offended and their masculinity threatened when confronted with the concept of equality. Perhaps the erosion of their role as “the provider” is a sensitive issue that they did not want to discuss. Many female FGD respondents also felt uncomfortable with the subject, even in the less traditional communities, and started to defend traditional values. The dynamics in the male FGDs revealed that boys and men felt they needed to maintain a socially acceptable stance around gender equality, referring to men who are not dominant enough as “*douchebags*.”

Box 3.1: What is gender equality? Perspectives on gender roles between tradition and change in the four communities

The view that men are superior to women is still widely shared in Roma communities, particularly the more traditional ones.

“The man should be a little more than the women. The woman should obey the man.” -Hristo Botev man 18-24 years old

“I don’t think that the good wife should, by all means, also work, if her husband has a job. Her job is to look after her home and the children, and to spoil her husband.” -Hristo Botev woman 14-16 years old

“The man should be the head, to be more than the woman – at least one head above her, to take care of her, of the children, of the family, of all the important things.” -Hristo Botev woman 18-24 years old

Perspectives on increasing gender equality and burden sharing in the household

“I think that there should be synchronicity, understanding, I cannot force her to just stay at home and cook and clean.” -Hristo Botev man 18-24 years old

“It is good for women to work, to take care of the household chores and the children. There’s nothing wrong if they work and develop.” -Hristo Botev man 18-24 years old

“Relationships are changing, but (domestic) help depends on individuals. According to me, most household chores are for women.” -Byala Slatina woman 18-24 years old

“There should be limits to equality! Women should not forget their obligations or change their roles! The woman should perform her obligations, but it would be good if she gets help – from her mother, her mother-in-law...” -Byala Slatina woman 18-24 years old

49. **While gender equality is not a widely accepted value, discussions have shown that a process of reevaluation and renegotiation of gender roles has started in some of the communities.** These changes were particularly visible around sharing domestic work responsibilities. Educated women in Hristo Botev and in Byala Slatina (aged between 18 and

24) who typically received a higher education, openly challenged the traditional division of labor in Roma families and demanded men play a more active role in supporting their partner with household chores and childcare responsibilities. They stated that “women with relatively higher education than men need more support from their husbands to have a career.” Female discussants of the same age group in Hristo Botev argued that while women are equal in their skills and potential, men usually prevent the career development of women. Interestingly, women aged between 40 and 60 years in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev said there is *de facto* equality between men and women, and that everyday domestic decisions are being jointly made by husbands and wives. Men in Byala Slatina stated that while they respect their wives, they do not engage in domestic housework, including taking care of the children. To them the gender roles are relatively rigid; however they reported that women are becoming “*increasingly aggressive*” and that they “*want to change roles with men.*” In Hristo Botev, some men stated that they are helping with housework and taking care of (grand) children if the women work. The box below contains a few voices on the state of gender roles in the four communities and captures the dynamics of the roles across the communities. Male respondents in the 18-24 age group demonstrated the ongoing reevaluation of gender roles with numerous references to an idealized past (e.g. in Hristo Botev where a respondent said that in the past “*women knew their place. Now there are more conflicts as women demand their rights*”).

50. **Roma men are failing to live up to the role of “the provider” for the family as persistent poverty, unemployment, and the inability to generate steady incomes is taking its toll.** Unemployed Roma men feel that they have failed as a man, husband, and father. Those who strongly subscribe to traditional gender values feel that they have lost their position in society and that they are no longer needed. Increasingly Roma men, across the four communities, seem to feel to be at a greater disadvantage in the domestic domain. The good husband is gradually losing control over his life and his family. The following quote is from a man, aged between 18 to 24 years, in Plovdev’s Sheker Mahala illustrates some of his concerns and his state of happiness:

“When a man has no money and is unable to have the necessary resources, he cannot be happy. Everyday you think of money. Your children go to school. They must have shoes to wear, they need clothes, and they need to be fed. Everyday you have to provide this. But there is nowhere to get these things from. So how can one be happy? And this is so for not just one week. Your whole life can be like that. None of us is working. And it is the same for the whole neighborhood. We have been living like this for many years.”

51. **In pre-transition Bulgaria, being a “good wife” or “good husband” was relatively easier as they had access to more resources and were relatively better off.** According to women between the ages of 40 and 60 years from Byala Slatina in a FGD, it was easier to be a good wife in previous generations because “there was more money and less conflict.” Men could

easily fulfill their role of being the family's breadwinner, and women could carry out their domestic responsibilities with ease. The increasing failure to discharge these roles is a recent phenomenon, and is changing their communities in a fundamental way. These statements are common across all the surveyed communities. The Roma's well-being seems to have a direct bearing on the fulfillment of their social norms, however, it may not be a sufficient condition for making strategic life choices that foster social inclusion into Bulgarian society.

52. The declining authority of Roma men inside the family in the absence of income is among the primary causes for high levels of stress inside the households. Even though traditional gender roles are formally upheld, *de facto* male authority in the family seems to be increasingly challenged by women, particularly in the absence of incomes originating from men. The FGD in Vesselinovo with men between 40 and 60 years of age reveals that tension between couples is on the rise. Men are increasingly losing authority to their spouses.

The following quote from the FGD participant illustrates this issue:

“A man asks his wife ‘what do we have for dinner?’. She says ‘Lift the lid of the pot and see’ And he raises the lid: two stones are inside the pot. The woman says ‘Eat these stones. Did you go out today to bring something so that I can cook?’ She does that because she is angry.”

A single woman in a FGD aged between 18 and 24 years in Byala Slatina remarked: “In our parents' generation, men were more responsible. They were ready to begin any work to provide bread to the family. Today's men loathe or are ashamed to do many things: they do not want to go and process tobacco, and do not want to work hard. They are selective. They are ready to sit idle, and not care about the family. They are waiting for something to happen without making any efforts.”

An elderly man in a FGD with men between 40 and 60 years of age in Byala Slatina pointed out the changing gender relations in households this way:

“Girls and young women have changed a lot. They require much more. It is very difficult for the young men now. Women command them.”

A young man in a FGD of men between the ages of 18 and 24 years in Hristo Botev said:

“Well, women have become very emancipated lately.... Before, when the man banged his fist on the table, order was restored. Now, every hen (woman) is putting on airs, she wants equality, but cannot learn the order at home.”

An 18-24 year old woman in Byala Slatina summarized the young men of her community in these words:

“Today's guys are sissies, spoiled, lazy, and irresponsible.”

53. **On average, focus groups reported an increase in domestic violence in comparison to a decade ago, and this has been attributed to the increased pressures Roma men feel from not living up to their role as a provider.** 60 percent of female respondents from Hristo Botev aged 40-60 reported that they are regularly beaten, 40 percent said it occurs sometimes. In Byala Slatina, female respondents from the same age group said that being beaten happens “more often now than during the socialist times.” Women and men aged 40-60 from Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo all reported that while beatings occur “sometimes” nowadays, they happened “almost never” ten or even 20 years ago because men were employed and happy at that time. While it is very likely that the past is being idealized, it is still noteworthy that perceptions of an increase in domestic violence were widely shared across focus groups and communities. Moreover, given the sensitivity of the issue of domestic violence and the stigma associated with it, the discussions among focus group members likely understate the actual extent and severity of domestic violence and marital stress.
54. **Poverty, joblessness, and financial problems were the most reported causes of conflict and domestic violence between husband and wife.** Unemployment, lack of food, and money—as well as everyday domestic arguments and conflict over how the family income should be distributed and spent—were unanimously quoted as the main reason for triggering increased domestic violence. Women often reported that men are irresponsible, do not look for work actively enough, and spend their small income on alcohol. Men felt that they are being held accountable for the dire economic situation of the family without being able to actively solve it and are frustrated that they are unable to live up to traditional expectations. Men seem to resort to conflict and domestic violence as a way to reassert their dominance in an environment where they are struggling to live up to their provider status. Alcohol was also reported as a major trigger for conflict and violence. While discussions did not go into any detail around alcohol (ab)use in the communities, it seems probable that increased alcohol consumption is part of the coping strategies for Roma men to deal with economic and household stress.

Below are from the men in an FGD in Vesselinovo aged between 40 and 60 years:

- “Sometimes a fight may start. But well, what can one do? One is shouting.”
- “What can I do? Go out and steal?”
- “It’s not happening often (the fight) because we are used to that life! The woman knows that we do not have anything. You tell her one word and she starts to scold you, you go outside, take a walk in the neighborhood and when you get calm, you go back home.”

Below are from the men in an FGD in Vesselinovo aged between 18 and 24 years:

- “When the man does not go to work, she says, ‘Go and find a job to feed your family.’ The squabbles and quarrels take place when one does not go to work because one cannot provide food for the family.”
- “It is not common to have a fight. She also gets used to not having much. But people get annoyed if they are hungry for 1,2, or 5 days, what will one do? Would you not be mad at me and tell me to go and dig some iron work and earn 2-3 leva for the kid?”

55. Roma men and women are coping with domestic stress and conflict in different ways, for example, a number of Roma men seem to choose separation as a viable exit strategy.

In recent years some Roma men have left their families in these four communities (i.e. abandoning their wife and children without providing for further economic support). Roma men’s most common stated reasons are their inability to provide food, have a steady income, and lead the family. Indeed, the absence of these implies that they are unable to meet the family’s expectations, which in turn adversely impacts their self-esteem. Roma women often lack the economic support to be able to leave their partner, even in the case of persisting domestic violence. The women who leave their husbands typically return to their parental families or start living with new partners. However, as the women from Sheker Mahala aged between 18 and 24 years explained, this decision largely depends on the economic situation of the parents and whether they are willing to, and able to, take care of her financially. In instances where a woman is unable to return to her parents and has no other place to go, she might risk domestic abuse and violence. In other cases, migrant wives abandon their husbands and children outside of the country (see Box 3.3). There are also cases when children of separated parents are left with their grandparents who are not entitled to child allowance, which continues to be deposited into the mother’s bank account.

Box 3.3 Migration as an exit strategy for Roma women

Roma women are increasingly opting to migrate, either leaving behind their husbands or abandoning them in the new country as they go about making ends meet. In Byala Slatina, the study found that more than 25 women have migrated to work abroad, abandoning their family – an act often associated with starting a new relationship abroad. Focus Group participants of men between the ages of 40 to 60 years explained these situations as follows:

“Well ... this is how it happens. There is no work here and hence the women decide to go abroad to work, to build a house for children, and to establish a stable life. When both husband and wife travel abroad, the man is unable to find a job but the woman often finds a job working in someone’s house— cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the elderly. Once she starts her job, her husband notices that she has begun a relationship with another man... in the family where she works. The husband begins to observe that she starts coming back home late, or says that she would rather stay in the house where she works or that she will come back home to him on Saturday and Sunday. But after a while she seldom comes back home. It is possible that the rich man gives her 50 euros to fool around with. And that’s how the arguments and quarrels begin among the migrant couple. Thereafter she stays with the new family and never returns to her husband. What can the man do? He returns home and that’s it. This is a mockery of the man.”

“A cousin of mine went to Italy with his wife who quickly found a job looking after an old woman in some family, but the husband could not find a job for himself. He spent all day on a chair in front of the TV and waited for her to come back. She left him and stayed with an Italian man. My cousin came back after half a year.”

“We are poor. The state is to be blamed. Year after year it is getting worse. Why would our women not run away from us? We eat beans for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When we go back home without money, they (women) ask us “what kind of a man are you? You cannot even provide bread for your children!”

“We are good people but we have no options to work. We go to Greece, supposedly for the better, for more money, and to be able to help our children. She starts to work at someone’s house, and I begin working in the fields. I ask her how she is, and she says “Well, I’m good!” and she says nothing. How can she say anything when she is about to leave me? And then she leaves me.”

A woman from Byala Slatina participating in the FGD for women between 40 and 60 years old articulated her personal story:

“Well...after they (my daughter and her husband) left for Cyprus, things got worse in the home. They left behind their child with me. Four years ago she disappeared without a trace. Her husband ended up in jail— he was not a good person... he was striking her and he was stealing. There is no work for him there...she had no work. She left her child with me with the promise to provide for her child. I am the grandmother of this child, and yet I am taking care of the child. What kind of a mother is she? She never phoned nor sent any money. She never inquired about her child. Unfortunately, I cannot get any support. The authorities cannot give me any money because I am not the child’s mother.”

Another woman from Byala Slatina who participated in the FGD for women between aged 40 and 60 years remarked:

“Bad women are those who go abroad and do not return, forgetting even their children. They stay abroad because life is better there and they do not care about their own families.”

Teenage boys and girls (aged between 14 to 16 years of age) in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo were convinced that:

“Women go abroad for either prostitution or taking care of elderly women.”

56. The virginity of women prior to marriage is a defining feature of women in all the Roma communities, though to varying degrees. The vast majority of FGD participants aged between 40 and 60 years across all communities argued that education is important and

necessary for Roma boys and girls in order to find work. But the traditional Roma communities in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo still remove girls from schooling before or by the eighth grade. This is done in order to protect her virginity and prepare her for marriage as soon as possible. According to most of the FGD participants in these neighborhoods, girls who continue their education past the age of 16 run the risk of being labeled “morally rotten” and that adversely impacts their finding a good husband. Kalaydzhii women aged between 18 and 24 years from Byala Slatina reported that grandmothers and mothers often nag their (grand-) daughters about their changing attitudes and expectations—typically the girls are less understanding of how men should be treated and respected. According to the senior women, the younger women seem to pick up such attitudes—that are antithetical to the socially desirable values associated with serving the man—from the surrounding non-Roma communities. They often warn the younger women that these new attitudes and expectations are highly unlikely to be tolerated by their potential husbands and mothers-in-law, respectively.

A teenage Reshetari girl in a FGD for 14-16 year olds in Byala Slatina described the importance of virginity in Roma society:.

“I am getting married in the summer. In our community, our neighbors constantly talk about all kinds of things about young girls and make up nonsense. If one applies lipstick or wears a modern blouse, then they will immediately call that girl a "whore." And usually the girls they talk the most about are often innocent ... and I will shut all of them up at my wedding ... i.e. it will become clear that I am a virgin.”

A Kalaydzhii girl from the same FGD narrated how the notion of virginity might be changing slightly in her community:

- “Now women marry after completing high school unlike in the past, and many even get married after 20 or 22 years, especially if they study at university. Now virginity is not as important, neither for the girls nor for the boys. However, it remains an important matter for the elders in the community. My grandmother always says that she will break my legs if she hears that people are telling stories about me. My parents speak very much about this especially now at the time of the graduation parties. Nowadays the mothers-in-law rarely dance with the wedding gown or the sheet of the virgin blood which was the case for our parents.”

57. Public discussions relating to virginity typically cause a lot of friction between traditional and non-traditional Roma girls, reflecting the changing views of virginity and womanhood. An FGD conducted among Reshetari (traditional) and Kalaydzhii (less traditional) women featured heated arguments. The box below captures a few dialogues condensed from two FGDs. These illustrate the traditions and modernity that Roma women face in their respective communities. The difference in opinions relate to premarital

relationships with boys, alternative lifestyle adopted from the Bulgarian society, the adherence to traditions of music and dance (belly dancing, folk music), and cultural values. The debate is set against the image of the “good wife” and “good daughter.” Traditional girls reiterate that they have a better understanding of morality and domestic issues and are willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of their respective families. They accuse the girls with “modern” attitudes of moral misconduct, sexual profligacy, laziness, and irresponsibility. The relatively better educated and less traditional Roma women disagree with them.

Box 3.4: Dialogues between Reshetari (traditional) and Kalaydzhii (less traditional) women

DIALOGUE 1: This conversation was between 18-24 year old Reshetari and Kalaydzhii Roma women in Byala Slatina:

Reshetari woman: “The Kalaydzhii have become worse than the Bulgarian girls! In our culture if you sleep with someone, you are married to him, and we know why we got married. That is exactly the reason we get married at an early age. We may be young in years but we are virgins. No one can tell stories about us later on. The Kalaydzhii are whores. They are married but they do not live with their husbands – when they have had enough of him, they let him go and find other men. They are making fools of their men but they pretend to not know it! ”

Kalaydzhii woman: "Why are you saying this about me? I am 16 years old and never had a boyfriend. I want to go to the university and after that I want to get married. What if I have a friend at the university? It does not mean that he is insulting me or treating me with disrespect."

DIALOGUE 2: This conversation was between 18-24 year old Reshetari and Kalaydzhii Roma women in Byala Slatina:

Kalaydzhii woman: "Why should I serve him after a hard day’s work when I go home exhausted? Why should he not help me with the cooking or with the care of our child?"

Reshetari woman: "How can you compare your work with men’s work? You will sit at the desk all day in front of the children (this young Kalaydzhii wants to become a teacher) while he is working hard at that time ... Men have hard jobs, their work is more responsible and important. Cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children are female work! You are lazy and hence you want all your work to be done by your husbands or your mothers and your mothers-in-law! For us it is not so! We still have our pride, dignity, and shame!"

3.3 Changing Social Relationships, Traditions, and Rituals in the Roma Communities

58. Intra-household and inter-generational relationships are in a state of flux as gender roles continue to evolve in the changing environment. The evolving gender roles, as discussed, are impacting intra-household dynamics and the relations between the generations. As traditional gender roles are breaking down, the behavior between family members are also affected. FGDs confirmed that it is becoming difficult to observe family traditions. The

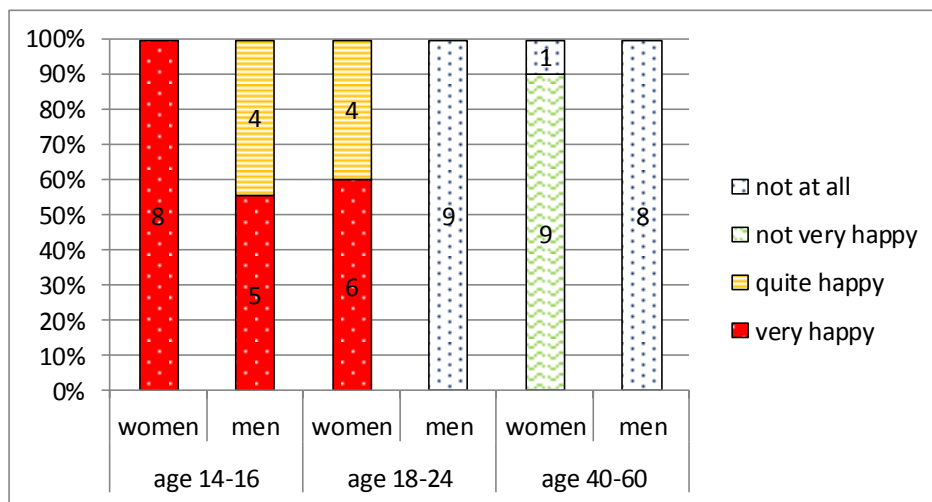
senior members of the household--parents and grandparents--are increasingly feeling the erosion of their influence on younger generations. The dearth of resources is also having a disempowering effect. The majority of FGD participants aged between 40 and 60 years (both male and female) reported that they are no longer able to exert the previously high level of influence on their children and grandchildren or make decisions for the family since they feel powerless against the new norms and values that the younger generations are adopting from Bulgarian society. Many expressed concerns of the irreversible nature of the change, which is adverse to their traditional and “good” values.

59. **Rituals and customary practices that enforce traditional gender relations are changing, thus permitting the change of gender norms.** The lack of financial resources is changing rituals around gender relations and marriage. Traditional rituals and customs around marriage,--e.g. pre-arranged marriages for young marriageable individuals by their parents— are becoming increasingly rare. In the most traditional communities where the tradition of “purchasing the bride” (i.e. paying a dowry for her virginity) is still practiced, parents are no longer able to pay the requisite dowry (*babahak*) and are settling for less. In the FGD in Vesselinovo with men aged between 18 and 24 years, the men reported that marriages have been increasingly delayed due to lack of money in the last three years. The price of dowries in their community has also significantly decreased, in some instances to a fourth of its traditional value, and in others to an eighth of its former value. Indeed, delay in marriages impacts notions of what constitutes a good girl or good wife, and further increases the gap between what is preached and what is practiced.
60. **Young couples and families are increasingly becoming dependent on the monetary or housing support of their parents to make ends meet at a time when the parental and older generations are barely able to support themselves.** In all FGDs with 40 to 60 year olds, both men and women reported that they are overwhelmingly disheartened by their children’s misery and the fact that they are unable to support them financially. Due to the lack of income, many families in the four communities reported that young families are obliged to live with the parents and grandparents, often in cramped spaces. The formation of large multi-family and multi-generational household units, instead of new single family units, creates conditions for increased stress and potential conflict among family members, not to mention the pressure on infrastructure and services, and the adverse impacts on health and hygiene.
61. **The perceived failure to comply with social and gender norms inside the community is altering social capital and social standing of families resulting in high levels of unhappiness.** The majority of surveyed men described their level of happiness as “unhappy” or “very unhappy” and attribute this directly to their inability to support their families, find work, provide food, and the lack of socio-economic opportunities for their children. Additional factors of unhappiness include increased domestic tensions caused by three or

more generations living together in a confined space. The inability to carry out rituals and customs is extremely stressful to men, since they used to invest considerable shares of their earnings in celebrations, festivities, and social commitments, including the *babahak* (dowry) for their sons’ marriages, while being able to comfortably provide for their family. Investing in these social events enhanced the family’s social capital, standing, and esteem in the community. Declining social capital creates additional levels of stress for Roma men as well as their families, and is fundamentally altering community relationships.

62. **The figure below is a snapshot of the happiness levels of respondents from Sheker Mahala who participated in the study.** While girls and women aged under 25 years and boys aged under 17 years reported being relatively happy, while both 40-60 year old women and men aged 18 years and above reported not being happy at all. Vesselinovo men who were also unhappy and all the male participants (ages 18-24 and 40-60 respectively) rated their level of happiness as either “very unhappy” or “unhappy.” without exception.

Figure 3.2: The Level of Happiness in Sheker Mahala



Source: Focus Group Discussions

63. **In sum, this chapter captures elements of the changing gender norms in the four Roma communities against the backdrop of a traditional normative framework that defines the ideal roles for women and men, and girls and boys.** The gap between the ideal and the practiced continues to increase as sustained poverty, unemployment, and a lack of resources play a critical part in transforming gender roles. The particular values around “men as providers” for the family, men being superior to women, and the virginity of women before marriage are fundamentally changing gender roles within some of the communities studied. This study comes at a point when non-traditional and external values from the wider Bulgarian society are gradually permeating the younger generation, though at varied rates across communities. Presumably these could become Roma-owned values over a period of

time; however, though they are currently being contested and rejected by the older generation as they struggle to practice their own customs and rituals. This causes high levels of stress and conflict. Other new couples, due to lack of resources, are staying with their parents, which has additional consequences of pressure on infrastructure and services as well as adverse impacts on health. Further this co-habitation creates fertile conditions for domestic conflict. The older generations remain unhappy relative to the younger ones, who are the future of the Roma. The next chapter will discuss agency and the drivers of change, analyzing how individuals make strategic life choices that might aid in the Roma's social inclusion.

Chapter 4: The Interaction of Social Norms and Agency in Making Strategic Life Choices

64. **This chapter builds upon the discussion of changing gender roles.** It explores how Roma women and men in the four communities make strategic life choices in the areas of education, employment, marriage and pregnancies, and how these choices are influenced by social norms, agency, and other factors. The depth of analysis varies by life choice area, affected by the sensitivity of topics collected in FGDs. Thus there is more discussion on education compared to marriage and pregnancy. And the research did not generate information on sex work and trafficking (as mentioned in Chapter 1) which led to it being dropped from the research investigation. It does not, however, diminish the importance of investigating its context in understanding the Roma communities' social inclusion in Bulgarian society. This chapter analyzes the strategic life choice areas of education, marriage and pregnancy and employment, in that order. Each of the three areas is divided into a discussion of social norms; the agency that assists in the making of choices in that area; and the drivers of change. This chapter uses quotes from the Roma to highlight their perspectives in the three areas.

4.1 Education

4.1.1 Social Norms Related to Education

65. **There is no agreement within the Roma communities about the appropriate level of education for a child or adult.** The survey reveals wide variations, independent of the age groups, sex of respondents, and the community. Roma girls and boys from less traditional communities in the 14 to 16 year age bracket seem to value education equally. The majority of female respondents from Byala Slatina (of Kalaydzhii sub-group) and Hristo Botev referred to university education as the most desirable level of education. In Hristo Botev, half of the girls believed that university education was ideal, while the other half consider secondary education sufficient. Men from Hristo Botev and Byala Slatina (Kalaydzhii sub-group) identified university or vocational education as the ideal level. In more conservative Roma communities (i.e. Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo) the ideal level of education varies from secondary for male respondents to lower secondary (eighth grade) for female respondents (see Figure 4.1 below). In these communities, primary education is generally considered enough (as opposed to ideal) for girls who are expected to become “a good wife and a good mother.”

Figure 4.1 Ideal Level of Education

| Ideal Years in School as Reported by FGD Participants Aged 14-16 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|---------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| Level | Years (Grades) | Byala Slatina (Kalaydzhi) | | Byala Slatina (Rushetari) | | Hristo Botev | | Sheker Mahala | | Vesselinovo | |
| | | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| Higher | >12 | Dark Blue | Red | | | Dark Blue | Red | Dark Blue | | | |
| Secondary | 12 | | | | | | | | Red | Dark Blue | Red |
| | 11 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 10 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 9 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Elementary | 8 | | | Dark Blue | Red | | | | | | Red |
| | 7 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 6 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 5 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 4 | | | | | | | | | | |

Source: Focus Group Discussions

Bars indicate the range of years reported by FGD participants, since precise estimates were not available.

66. Education is not always the priority for Roma boys and girls, since the perceived returns in education compared to income to support families is low.²⁴ Increasing proportions of Roma boys and girls are completing the eighth grade, but competing priorities hinder their learning achievements, especially if a student is poor and Bulgarian language is not the mother tongue. The majority of Roma children from poor households attend school only when their parents have specially set aside resources. When there is not enough, boys are encouraged to work to support the family. Roma boys from Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala aged 14-16 stated that their school does not prepare them for their future (i.e. completing secondary education does not increase their chances of getting a job). Many Roma boys mentioned that they continue to struggle with reading and speaking in the Bulgarian language despite completing secondary education. They concluded that school does not pay off.

67. The perceived low returns on investment in education can be attributed to a combination of factors in the four Roma communities: (i) low learning achievements, (ii) an abundance of well-paid unskilled jobs in the recent past (e.g. during the construction

²⁴ Roma families in general do value mainstream education, as evidenced by the EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data, which indicates that 81 percent of the Roma in Bulgaria consider at least upper secondary an adequate level of education for boys, and 76 percent consider it so for girls.

boom in Hristo Botev and other big cities), (iii) additional expenses related to transportation, clothing, food, school material, social life, and (iv) large opportunity costs, including the time to generate income for daily survival or the time to attend family and social obligations. Furthermore, learning achievements (depending on the particular Roma community) are potentially reduced by: (i) difficulties with the Bulgarian language, (ii) lenient attendance and qualification policies of schools in Roma neighborhoods, (iii) limited support available at home, (iv) patterns of early socialization (e.g. the introduction to traditional crafts), and (v) (perceived) difficulties in finding employment due to discrimination. Another important factor is the age of marriage. Roma boys and girls who marry while going to school leave school to address other and new priorities that marriage brings to their lives.

68. School enrollment and attendance, especially in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, are largely determined by the financial condition of the family.²⁵ The financial situation of a family is the primary reason for both sending children to school as well as withdrawing them from school. Many families send children to school either for the free breakfast they receive in school or to meet the social assistance condition that their children attend school. Moreover, many children are unable to attend school because they do not have proper clothing or shoes, or because they cannot afford the transportation to school and back.²⁶ In Vesselinovo, for example, the winter season has the highest absenteeism among students because Roma families face the most severe economic challenges then, with job opportunities in the agricultural sector at their lowest. A boy attending secondary school in Vesselinovo noted that he misses many classes in the winter because he is unable to brave the harsh and snowy climatic condition with his bicycle. The Roma in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo repeatedly argued that it is better to use money to buy bread instead of spending it on daily travel to school. When the goal is survival, and hunger is the daily routine, school can hardly be considered a priority. The figure below shows the actual years completed by Roma boys and girls as reported by FGDs.

²⁵ The analysis of EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data by de Laat and Danchev (2012) also indicates that economic barriers are the primary cause of drop-outs for the Roma population in Bulgaria (43.1 percent for boys and 29.4 percent for girls).

²⁶ According to the EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data (de Laat and Danchev, 2012), while distance to school is not a significant impediment for attending primary schools-- as over 90 percent of Roma families live within 3 km distance from primary schools-- distance seems to be a significant factor for secondary education, since the nearest secondary schools are over 5 km away for about one-third of Roma families.

Figure 4.2 Years Completed in School

| Actual Years in School as Reported by FGD Participants Aged 18-24 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| Level | Years (Grades) | Byala Slatina (Kalaydzhi) | | Byala Slatina (Rushetari) | | Hristo Botev | | Sheker Mahala | | Vesselinovo | |
| | | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| Higher | >12 | █ | █ | | | | | | | | |
| Secondary | 12 | | | | | █ | █ | | | | |
| | 11 | | | | | █ | █ | | | | |
| | 10 | | | | | █ | █ | | | | |
| | 9 | | | | | █ | █ | | | | |
| Elementary | 8 | | | █ | █ | | | █ | █ | █ | |
| | 7 | | | █ | █ | | | █ | █ | █ | |
| | 6 | | | | | | | █ | █ | █ | |
| | 5 | | | | | | | █ | █ | █ | |
| | 4 | | | | | | | | | █ | |

Source: Focus Group Discussions

Bars indicate the range of years reported by FGD participants, as precise estimates were not available.

The following quotes from the FGDs in Vesselinovo illustrate how poverty affects schooling:

- “We have problems reading and writing because we did not have shoes and clothes to go to school. We missed a long time, and that is why. The teachers did not work with us, and the other kids were given some money to buy things. You watch them and you feel terrible. That’s why we don’t quite want to go to school.” –Boy aged 14-16
- “If there’s money, children will continue to study. But if it’s not possible, I have to buy clothes, other things. School requires funds. If you don’t have it, the kid will go, and they will say ‘look at that ragged gypsy.’ Who doesn’t want his kid to learn?! Everybody wants that.” -Man aged 18-24
- “When I don’t have money for the bus, I get on my bike and I go to town because I don’t want to interrupt my schooling. My mother is worried that I may get hit by a car. It is better when we have money because I get on the bus, and it takes me there. But you have to have 5 leva every day for that. If the bike breaks, that’s it with the school.” -Boy aged 14-16
- “I have three children, boys – 14, 12 and 10—but none of them go to school because there’s no money. They go there only for a day so that they see them and give them the note for the social assistance, but it’s not enough. The kids don’t really go to school to study.” -Man aged 40-60

- “We have concerns about the kids travelling to school, and many too. They are financial. To go to the town, you need 1.70 leva for transport each way...the kid is among people there--bigger schoolmates—and the kids are worried. It boils down to money again. Then the time comes when you have to stop the kid because there’s no money again. There even was a time when the school (the one in the town) helped with money for the bus. But they stopped it. There was a bus that collected children who studied in the town, but it only lasted 2-3 months. They started collecting children again, but they only take Bulgarian kids. They don’t take the gypsies.” -Man aged 18-24

Box 4.1: Case Study: School attendance in Vesselinovo—Boys vs. Girls

In Vesselinovo, where educational outcomes are the lowest among the communities studied, young boys typically want to complete secondary education, but they assume they will only be able to complete lower secondary, at most. Among the men aged 18-24 years from Vesselinovo who participated in the FGDs, the majority did not study beyond the seventh or eighth grades. It is important to highlight, though, that Roma boys still wish to continue education. As a boy aged 14-16 years old expressed: “I want to go to school, to have an education. I want to grow up to be somebody. There’ll be more hope for a job. I see that our parents are illiterate; they don’t know a thing and people think they are nothing. If some Bulgarian hires him for 2-3 days, he’ll earn very little. When you don’t have education, people think little of you. I hope we, too, will become somebody.” Only one boy in the group of 14-16 year olds expects to complete secondary education. He studies in the upper secondary school in Yambol. Every day, he commutes to school by bicycle for 7-8 kilometers. In the winter, he says he misses a lot of classes because of the distance and the cold climate.

In the FGD with the 14-16 year old girls, participants reported that only four are studying while the others have dropped out and gotten married. Three of them have children, and one is the mother of two. In the whole village, only one woman has completed secondary education and one is currently enrolled in the eleventh grade. The young woman who has completed her secondary education is now 21, and is the mother of one child. She explains that although she got married at a very young age (10 years old), her mother-in-law insisted that she complete her secondary education. At the moment she is unemployed and is convinced that this is because of discrimination in the Bulgarian society.

69. It is common for children, especially boys, to leave school to support their families, to conform to the traditional gender norm of providing for the family; to be perceived as hardworking and not lazy; and to supplement the income of the father or brothers. In Vesselinovo and Sheker Mahala, and among the Reshetari group in Byala Slatina, many FGD participants mentioned that children from poor families leave school to work in order to bring money to the family. Typically their parents are unemployed. In these communities, it is not uncommon for boys aged 12 or 13 years to look for work to feed their families. In the worst cases, boys start working as soon as they complete first grade, although parents in FGDs said they would prefer their children study than work. Other parents argued that what their children earn is mostly spent to meet the children's needs. Even if children do not leave school, they often miss classes when the family does not have sufficient money. In such

circumstances, boys often skip school to earn money--collecting recyclable materials and exchanging them for cash. The following quote from a FGD with men aged 18-24 years in Vesselinovo illustrates this reality:

- “Usually when a boy is 12 or 13 years of age, he begins to look for a job to provide for his family. What can I do – go to school or provide food for my mother and father! They could go and collect garbage, they could find bottles and plastic or cans.”

70. When schools are at a distance, the majority of Roma students do not want to leave the community to pursue secondary education since it risks the loss of virginity of girls and the loss of potential earnings to the family for the boys. The majority of Roma girls aged between 14 and 16 years from traditional communities argued that they have no incentive to continue education if they want to stay inside their family and community, since pursuing school beyond that age is socially unacceptable in the community. If a girl is already married, then going to school is even more difficult. Girls who would like to continue education are faced with the reality that they would have to physically leave their family and community behind in order to do so. In brief, making an extra effort for attending schools is generally not encouraged by the family or the community.

71. The low quality of Roma children’s education also constrains their educational achievements and reduces the value of staying in school. In Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, for example, Roma children live and study in a segregated mid-sized urban neighborhood and in a large rural Roma neighborhood, respectively, where the quality of education is very low. In Sheker Mahala, even though boys usually complete eighth grade, it is a challenge to find young people aged between 18 and 24 years who can easily speak Bulgarian. Elderly men pointed out that the education received by children in the neighborhood is not of good quality. However, they are not inclined to do anything about it. All young men from the community who participated in the FGD said that they have problems reading and writing. In Vesselinovo, the participants in the FGD acknowledged that although they have school certificates, they are practically illiterate, and even the majority of the graduates of sixth and eighth grade have difficulties with reading. Similar claims are heard in Vesselinovo. Some of these are quoted below:

- “We have studied up to grades five, six, or eight. I have studied up to the seventh grade, but I don’t know a thing. The teachers didn’t teach us. None of the people our age know how to write or read.” -Boy aged 18-24 years
- “My kids cannot read. They went to school just like that. The teacher just wants to get her salary, and what happens to the little gypsy – she does not care. Mine is in the seventh grade. Give him something to read, and you will see how much they know and how well they teach them.” -Man aged 40-60

- “Children go to school, but there’s nobody to teach them. It’s not like it used to be. Back then, when we missed school, the policeman would come and give us a beating...and the next morning, of course you’ll go. And now, you send the kid, and there’s nobody to teach him. Mine is in the eighth grade and doesn’t know how to work with the computer.” -Man aged 40-60

72. Schools are not rigorous (e.g. attendance appears to not be mandatory), which affects Roma students’ educational achievements. In Hristo Botev for example, students can be absent from school for weeks without being penalized by teachers; and their absence is often not registered in the schoolbooks. The young girls of Hristo Botev’s weekly schedules shows that students are permitted to arrive late at school. The time of their arrival depends on the time they wake up, which is not necessarily before the start of their first class. A 14-year old girl admitted that she usually gets up between 10 and 11am, while classes start at 8am, and that everybody goes to school when they wake up. In the FGDs, adolescent respondents said they do not record any time in their schedules for studying besides school hours. In the neighborhood of Sheker Mahala, student absences are also frequent in lower secondary school. Survey participants who are on conditional social assistance programs admitted that their children often miss school.

73. Many Roma children are in school for non-academic motives rather than receiving education, which promotes perverse incentives and further weakens the education system. Student enrollment for (i) social assistance that is tied to school attendance; (ii) a minimum completion requirement of lower secondary school (eighth grade) for holding a driver’s license; and (iii) school meal programs does not result in learning achievements. In fact achievements worsen because students do not study and often fail to attend class. The FGDs revealed that children are not necessarily required to attend all classes to benefit from the social assistance program or the meal programs; since school budgets are tied to the number of students enrolled. As such, schools have every incentive to keep a higher number of students on their books, regardless of their attendance or performance.²⁷ Under such circumstances, it would be easier for parents to ask teachers not to mark their children absent in order to meet the eligibility for social programs. This alignment of parental and teacher interests appears to further erode the education system. The following quotes from a FGD in Vesselinovo illustrate these issues:

²⁷ Most schools in Bulgaria are funded by municipalities. Municipalities receive subsidies from the state budget and transfer the funds to the schools, based on a funding formula, of which at least 80 percent is based on the number of enrollments.

- “The good thing is that they provide lunch at school. They give us kebabs and mash. We are happy. There aren’t such things at home. And there, they give us mash, whatever they give us, we eat it. We dip our bread in it. We are grateful for that too.” -Boy aged 14-16
- “They almost go to school for the breakfast. They give them breakfast; kids eat it and go home.” -Man aged 18-24
- “They all go, because if they don’t, the social assistance would stop. They may miss two or three days, but then start going again.” -Man aged 40-60

4.1.2 Agency to Make Strategic Life Choices on Education

74. For a number of Roma youth, the agency to make decisions about education is given by their parents, but economic conditions limit their choices. In cases where parents do not insist their children attend school, Roma youth tend to leave or pursue school at their own will. Particularly in the case of young Roma men leaving school, parents’ roles seem to be more indirect than direct, and largely tied to their economic situation and level of education. In many cases where parents are not committed to their children’s education, children make the decision to leave school on their own, without much resistance from their parents. One-third of male respondents from Hristo Botev aged between 40 and 60 years reported that they are illiterate and are not concerned with the education of their children. In Vesselinovo, a number of children seem to make the decision in accordance with the material situation of the family as well as the social norms at play in their respective communities. Parents do not appear to oblige their children to stay in school, nor are they able to support the schooling of their children. A male respondent from the FGD in Vesselinovo (representing 14 to 16 year olds) observed:

- “In principle, parents say to the girls: ‘if you want to study further, I can’t stop you. But you will go on foot; I don’t have money to support you.’ And she makes up her mind and says: ‘Well, if we don’t have money, Dad, I won’t go.’”

Boys and girls from Vesselinovo in lower secondary school show no desire to continue after the eighth grade “because school is boring” or “because [they] become lazy” or there is “the need to get married.” The lack of parents’ insistence in keeping their children in school is manifested in the quotes from the FGDs below:

- “We decide to stop attending school ourselves. When you want to study, you must have funds. When they take you in Yambol (for secondary school after eighth grade) you need 3-4 leva every day. Can my folks give me 3 leva every day? There’s no money to buy bread today...and I need 3 leva every day. They don’t have money to support me. You watch and decide there is no money. And you stop. No parent here has ever prevented their child from studying. Who doesn’t want his child to study, to be somebody!” – Vesselinovo boy aged 14-16 years

- "I will choose to stay at home instead of going to school. It is very boring there. Staying at home is not boring; we play with rubber bands and ropes all day." –Vesselinovo girl aged 14-16 years
- "I attended school only in the first grade because I had to go to work. Otherwise my parents were staying at home and had nothing to eat." -Vesselinovo, boy aged 14-16 years
- "The Reshetari Roma stop going to school at a very early age because their parents are unemployed and children need to work to support their parents!" -Byala Slatina, Reshetari Roma girl 14-16 years old)
- "Children must study, and they should not be forced to go to work. But when you have no money and when children want something I tell my children, 'Come with me in the field to earn some money.'" -Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24 years

75. **In traditional Roma communities, parents often take away their daughter's choice to pursue education when they reach puberty.** The value attached to virginity is a key factor affecting Roma girls' agency around education. Because of the high value attached to the virginity of brides at the time of marriage in traditional Roma communities (i.e. Sheker Mahala, portions of Hristo Botev, and among the Reshetari group in Byala Slatina), a girl's honor is deemed lost if she has a sexual relationship before marriage, or if she is sexually assaulted by a man. For this reason, many parents do not permit their adolescent daughters (around 13 or 14 years old) to attend school because they fear their girls will be in contact with boys either on the way to school or in the town. In Vesselinovo, the upper secondary school is not in the neighborhood. This distance means parents do not necessarily want to encourage their daughters to continue after secondary school. The following FGD quotes from girls aged between 14 and 16 years in Vesselinovo illustrate how the value attached to virginity is affecting the school and marriage choices of Roma girls:

- "Some parents do not allow their daughter to go to school in the city because boys will make advances at her in the bus. She can start seeing a boy; they can decide they want to be together. Parents keep their daughter from the boys because here, virginity is important. The Roma seek girls who are virgins--we hold firmly to this. A girl should be virgin. That is why parents do not allow the girls to go to Yambol. They are afraid that something might happen along the way."
- "Girls who are not going to school any more --they do not go because they are married."

76. **Girls' agency to prioritize studies over domestic work is possible when less reliance is placed on their help with household chores.** In the four communities the amount of time required for domestic work by female students negatively correlates with the level of their

educational attainment. In Byala Slatina, where most female Kalaydzhii students are not expected to do domestic work if they are in school, girls complete high school and many of them advance to university. Kalaydzhii girls aged between 14 and 16 years spend 2.5-3 hours more a day on studying than Reshetari Roma girls of the same age. Meanwhile Reshetari girls who still attend school spend hours looking after their younger siblings, cousins, nephews, and neighborhood children every day. They also boast that they can cook, and have mastered almost all of the skills to maintain a home. Most of them do not continue schooling after the eighth grade. In Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, where most Roma girls do not complete the eighth grade, young women aged between 18 and 24 years spend about seven hours a day doing domestic work. In Hristo Botev, where around half of Roma women complete high school, young women are expected to do domestic work regardless of their enrollment in school, although not as much as in Sheker Mahala or Vesselinovo.

77. **The fear of ethnically-motivated violence appears to be an additional factor leading to the early dropout of Roma girls and boys.** This concern was especially shared in urban areas (i.e. Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala), where parents stated that it would be easier for Roma children to finish school if they are not exposed to racial hatred and discrimination.

4.1.3 Drivers of Change

78. **Some younger Roma women's ideas on gender roles, particularly around education, are beginning to align with those of the mainstream society.** This is found among the young Kalaydzhii and Djorevtsi women in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev, respectively. Some young women aspire to complete university and pursue professional careers. If they pursue these goals, they would be parting from their traditional gender roles or at least expanding their roles. They recognize their right to develop a career and delay marriage so they can complete their higher education and find an appropriate job. In Byala Slatina, the majority of Kalaydzhii women (aged between 18 and 24 years) continue their education through university and talk about their professional objectives of being a teacher, a doctor, or a lawyer. Most of the Reshetari women in the same age range are already married and are taking care of their children without any interest in education or a profession. In Hristo Botev, female university students are more open to gender equality of skills and responsibilities, while the rest of 18-24 year old participants firmly believe men are superior.

79. **Those Roma girls who prioritize education over traditional gender roles generally pursue a less traditional and more unconventional lifestyle.** In Byala Slatina, many 18-24 year old Kalaydzhii women move freely in and out of the Roma neighborhood, and read, use the internet, listen to popular music, observe youth subcultures, meet in parks and pastry shops in the town center, and play sports. The contrast between these women and the more traditional women is stark. More traditional Reshetari women of the same age in Byala Slatina are usually married by this age, and their time is occupied by their family and household. The Reshetari women who participated in the FGDs usually have fun either at

home or just outside of their house. They never leave their neighborhood unaccompanied. In their spare time they entertain themselves by watching Turkish TV with their mothers-in-law. Their communication with friends and relatives is limited and guided by their parents-in-law. In Hristo Botev, if young Roma women leave the house unaccompanied, they are viewed scornfully by the neighbors. Neighbors, according to the FGD participants, generate rumors about anyone who takes such liberties; however, the few women in higher education are determined to carry on with their lifestyles—they are open to the option of leaving the neighborhood and spending the rest of their life outside of the Roma community.

80. **The Roma women pursuing higher education in this study have the following characteristics in common:** (i) they have parents who strongly support their education; (ii) they studied in integrated schools; and (iii) they speak Bulgarian at home. The sections below will elaborate further.

81. **The most prominent characteristic observed among the assertive Roma women is their parents' strong commitment to supporting their daughters' education.** In Hristo Botev, three 18-24 year old women from the FGDs, who are either in university or have completed university, have studied in primary and secondary schools outside their neighborhood. The rest of the FGD participants study or studied in their neighborhood schools. According to the university-educated women, their parents decided to send them to integrated schools outside the neighborhood to study with ethnic Bulgarian children, where the quality of education is higher. Without this intentional decision by their parents, these women would not have had the opportunity to attend schools that prepared them to advance to higher education. In Byala Slatina, the parents of Kalaydzhii women are also determined to support and invest in their daughters' education, and many even work abroad to finance their daughters' university education. These parents do not insist on their daughters' involvement in domestic work, and are emotionally prepared to send their daughters off to cities for university education.

82. **Integrated schools, which seem to provide higher quality education, prepare Roma girls to reach more advanced education levels.** Further, interactions with non-Roma students expose Roma girls to alternative values and lifestyles, which positively influences their attitudes toward education and having a professional career. In addition to parental support, Roma girls find education outside the Roma neighborhoods to be better quality and more rigorous. The majority of Hristo Botev students who attend integrated schools outside the neighborhood spend at least two hours a day preparing for their lessons, aspire to graduate from university, and plan to find employment. Among the 18-24 year old FGD participants who attend integrated schools, the schools are usually outside the neighborhood. All Hristo Botev FGD participants who have gone onto university attended integrated schools. In Byala Slatina, neither Kalaydzhii nor Reshetari girls study in integrated primary schools, but they study in integrated secondary schools. Reshetari girls who live on the fringes of their neighborhood and farther away from secondary schools, tend to only complete up to the

eighth grade. The study observes that Roma girls' increased exposure to alternative and new values, lifestyles, and cultures (through interaction with non-Roma students in the integrated schools) has a positive influence on their attitudes toward education, career, and gender roles. However, as in the case of the Reshetari girls, other factors prevent educational attainment and pre-determined outlook in agency prevent them from reaching upper secondary school.

83. Knowledge of the Bulgarian language provides a significant boost to higher education aspirations and achievement. Educational outcomes are generally lower among the Roma where Bulgarian language is not spoken in daily life. This study observed a large group of young Roma in segregated Roma neighborhoods, such as Vesselinovo and Sheker Mahala, that do not speak the Bulgarian language and face additional educational challenges and communicating with the non-Roma Bulgarians. Having limited exposure to the Bulgarian language in pre-school,²⁸ they face immense challenges understanding lessons and staying on track with the curriculum when they enter primary school. Such students (as well as their parents) find it difficult to get good educational value since the children are unable to learn satisfactorily. In contrast, among the Roma study participants in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev who are fluent in Bulgarian (and a significant number of them also speak it as a mother-tongue in their respective homes), the language is not an obstacle in their education or interactions with the non-Roma Bulgarians.

84. In summary, in the more conservative and poorer communities the social norm pressures are stronger; and boys and young men are easily pushed towards being their family's provider instead of attending school. Girls, meanwhile, find it almost impossible to continue their education after reaching puberty because of concerns about their loss of virginity prevents them from leaving their domestic space. The poor educational quality, school locations outside of the Roma communities, and the financial challenges of attending

²⁸ Preschool attendance among Roma children is low. Preschools could help Roma children better prepare for primary school and increased educational achievements, but high costs and preferences for a prolonged period of home-based care discourage Roma parents from sending their children to preschools. According to de Laat and Danchev (2012), Roma children enrolled in preschool are likely to have higher Bulgarian language skills than other children of the same age in the same neighborhood not enrolled in preschool. Moreover, Roma children who attended kindergarten tend to receive significantly higher grades in school, compared to those who did not attend kindergarten.²⁸ The preschool enrollment rate of Roma children in Bulgaria, however, is very low (38 percent for girls and 42 percent for boys), compared to that of the general population (75 percent),²⁸ even though at least two years of preschool education is compulsory in Bulgaria. De Laat and Danchev (2012) explains that this is mainly due to (i) the high out-of-pocket-expenses associated with preschool enrolment (40 percent)—which reaches as high as EUR 40 a month on average, (ii) preference for home care (29 percent), and (iii) perception of Roma parents who believe their children are too young for preschool (29 percent). As a way of enforcing preschool enrollment, the Government has established legal provisions which fines parents if their children are not enrolled in compulsory preschool education, but the law is not implemented as the fine collection mechanisms are not clarified.

school make the education system unattractive to many Roma children and their families. Furthermore, non-academic motives (i.e. free food and conditional social assistance) encourage the Roma to enroll children in school, but this perversely serves the school authorities whose state funding is proportional to student enrollment and not on learning results. On the other hand, more liberal, urban, and strategic parents encourage their children to attend school, even when it is outside the community. Those Roma children who attend integrated schools seem to do well. This is of particular significance to Roma girls and young women who exercise their agency to pursue higher education; adopt mainstream language, ideas, values, and lifestyles (that are often opposed to traditional gender and social norms); and aspire for a professional career in the general Bulgarian society. The strategic choice of education appears to be the most beneficial to these young women who can become socially included in the wider society, on par with other non-Roma Bulgarians.

4.2. Marriage and Pregnancy

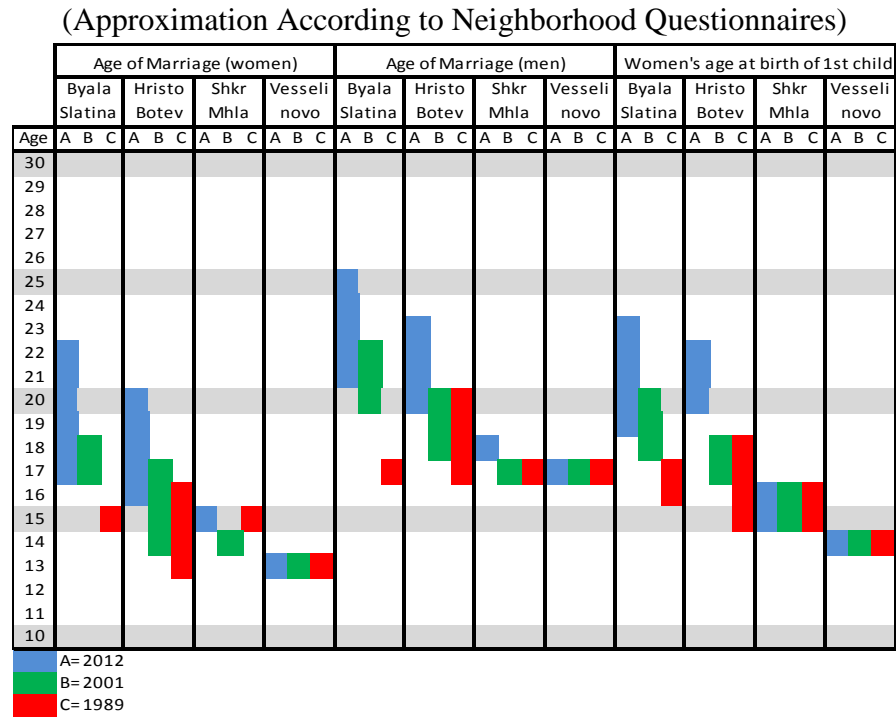
4.2.1 Social Norms and Agency around Marriage and Pregnancy

85. While the age of Roma girls at first marriage and childbirth is generally increasing, this is less pronounced in traditional communities, where women are pressured to marry at an early age (see Figure 4.3 below). The young Kalaydzhi women disapprove of early marriage --to them it is an obstacle to personal development. The young Reshetari women associate early marriage as a proof of their maturity, morality, and beauty, while also being an appreciation of their societies' preserved traditions and values. In Sheker Mahala, unmarried girls aged over 14 or 15 years old are regarded with disfavor by the community and may not be in demand for marriage. There is also a tendency for younger girls to marry sooner before boys migrate out of community for work. The following quotes from Vesselinovo and Sheker Mahala illustrate women feeling coerced to marry and give birth as early as possible:

- “At the age of 20, who’s going to like you?! When you turn 20, you are told that you have grown old. Until you turn 20 you should have children. If you are not married at the age of 18-19, this means you are not decent. They say, ‘If she were pretty, she would be married, she wouldn’t stay with her mother’.” Boys say that, and girls say that, too. When you are 18-19 years old, you have at least 2 children.” -Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24 years
- “Girls marry when they are 15-16 years of age. When a girl turns 18, she is already an old girl. Boys do not want her any more. They want a lamb! When they are 17-18 years of age, girls already have 2 children. If she has married at 13, you can bet she has a child at 14. Now they marry at an earlier age.” -Sheker Mahala man aged 18-24 years

- “A girl must have given birth to a child before she reaches 15 years of age. Otherwise, her mother-in-law would say that she is barren and they will try to find another bride.” – Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24 years

Figure 4.3: Trends in the age of marriage and pregnancy in the four neighborhoods



Source: Neighborhood Questionnaires

Bars indicate the range of age reported by respondents, since precise estimates were not available.

86. **As discussed in the previous chapter, the Roma families’ lack of financial resources is changing rituals, ceremonies, and traditions around marriage.** Traditional rituals and customs around marriage (e.g. pre-arranged marriages for young individuals by their parents) are becoming increasingly rare. Lack of resources has meant a reduction in pomp and ceremony. In the more traditional communities like Vesselinovo, the custom of “purchasing the bride” (i.e. paying a dowry for the bride’s virginity) is still practiced, but parents are no longer able to pay the requisite dowry (*babahak*) and are settling for less. In a Vesselinovo FGD with 18 and 24 year old men, it was reported that in the past three years, marriages have been delayed due to lack of money. All this has meant that marriage seems to be eroding as a traditional status marker, and this might partly explain the gradual rise in informal cohabitation among young couples.

87. **The Roma cite the rising trend away from formal marriage to informal cohabitation among younger Roma couples as one of the most visible changes.** Almost a generation ago, virtually all Roma were formally married before living together—that was the only socially acceptable way of moving in together as a couple. Nowadays formal marriage is on

track to being an exception. The driving factor for this change is not a shift in social norms, but rather the (administrative) costs induced by formal marriage, in combination with the incentives – in the form of higher social benefits – offered to unmarried women and mothers.²⁹ Quotes from FGDs in Byala Slatina and Vesselinovo below explain the incentives for choosing informal over formal marriage:

- “The young prefer cohabiting without a civil marriage. Thus, when a child is born, the mother gets a larger children’s allowance, and when the child attends a public nursery or a kindergarten, you pay only one half of the fee. No, here nobody checks whether the mother and father live together, you just receive the allowance after filing an application. Moreover, I think that in the past it was obligatory to marry, while now it isn’t.” -Byala Slatina man aged 18-24 years
- “We are all married. But without a marriage, just like that, on friendly terms. As for the old – they are all married. Nowadays a marriage costs more than BGN 150 (approximately US\$ 100). Where can we get this money for the marriage? We do not have even a dime, how can we think about a marriage? At the time of Todor Jivkov, people used to have money; they had a job; the Producers’ Cooperatives were functioning. But now it is real poverty. I have no idea how to describe it. Nobody in the neighborhood lives better. We all know each other, we are neighbors, and we are in the same boat.” -Vesselinovo man aged 18-24 years
- “Only the old are married. They are married because, formerly, money was given to those who marry; that’s what I’ve heard. And if you have taken out a loan from the bank, it is remitted when the third child is born. That is why they married, and we have nothing. Civil marriage? It costs money.” –Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24

88. Changes in marital practices impacted social norms around the level of commitment in partnerships. The changes in marital practices seem to originate from a strategy to save limited resources. Because couples are no longer formally married, separations have become easier since divorce is no longer required. As a result, separations are becoming common and “serial monogamy” is increasingly being practiced. This seems to be acceptable in varying degrees across the four Roma communities. In the more integrated Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev communities, unstable relationships (i.e. marriages) are discussed by all age groups. In

²⁹ Young Roma in general confirm the economic motives of choosing cohabitation over formal marriage, which applies not only to Roma, but to the Bulgarian population in general. The elderly in communities point out that Roma couples usually start cohabitating at a very young age when they cannot legally marry. By the time they reach the legal age for marriage, many couples are already separated.

Sheker Mahala, the respondents shared the opinion that it is now easier for young people to separate. In Vesselinovo, changes in the duration of relationships are not explicitly raised in the FGDs with men, but they report that the separation of the partners and the subsequent “marriages” are becoming common. Women, especially the older ones, believe that families are relatively less stable than before as expressed by the quotes from FGDs in Vesselinovo and Sheker Mahala below:

- “None of us is married, so I can take my children and leave. That way I can find another man. How can I divorce, I need money for that!” -Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24 year)
- “If the young do not get along well, they part. That is why they do not marry. If they are married, it will be more difficult to separate. She will have to divorce him and then have a civil marriage with the other one. There are people who marry. They contract a civil marriage and later she sues him for child support. That is why most people do not contract a civil marriage.” -Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24 years
- “Here all are married. In our younger years we got married to each other. Now they do not get married. He can make her pregnant, then he can leave her and ‘Goodbye, Bulgaria.’ This is the end. Now young people do not trust each other. In our years there was no such a thing. Now men leave the girls with two or three children and that is the end.” -Vesselinovo woman aged 40-60 years
- “It is not a big deal if there is no marriage because when you want to substitute your wife, you throw her out and you take another woman. You will not bother to get a divorce.” - Sheker Mahala man aged 18-24 years

89. In communities where women’s roles are mostly limited to domestic work, the recent rise in informal marriages has made wives more vulnerable to abandonment by their husbands. The absence of a legally binding marriage has made separation easier and made the payment of alimony less common. Economic constraints have made it more difficult for many Roma men (or their parents) to provide for the family. Increased familial tensions and the absence of incentives to maintain the union have increased the likelihood of separation . It is generally believed that when a Roma woman is abandoned, she becomes more exposed to the risks of trafficking and prostitution. It is also worth noting that according to Roma women, children of unmarried couples are more vulnerable if their fathers die, since they will not be entitled to paternal death social benefits.

4.2.2 Agency to Make Strategic Life Choices on Marriage and Pregnancy

90. While social norms and the importance of virginity appear to pressure Roma women to marry at an early age, they seem to have the agency to make their own decisions about marriage and their number of children. According to FGDs, a relationship starts when a girl feels ready for an intimate relationship with a man, which often means a marriage. However, there seems to be agreement among most of FGD participants that men and women make joint decisions about the number of children to have. The most conservative communities' participants insisted that joint decisions were historically not the case, though this fact is changing. Box 4.2 captures some of the voices around this issue.

Box 4.2: Decisions on Pregnancies

"Of course, the woman decides (how many children she will give birth to). The man is not doing anything. Okay, he does something but the woman has the baby in her womb and then she is the one to be examined at the gynecology chair, to be in labor, and not him. She is pushing to give birth to a child, she risks her life, then she is feeding the baby. And for that reasons she is the one to decide!" -Reshetari girl aged 14-16 in Byala Slatina

"If she has said she would give birth to only two children, and she does not want more children but then if both are girls ... if the man wants a boy, can she refuse?" -Reshetari girl aged 14-16, Byala Slatina

"Well, if she has given birth to two girls and the man wants a male child, she will have to give birth to another child." -Reshetari girls aged 14-16, Byala Slatina

"Isn't she the one to decide?" - Reshetari girl aged 14-16, Byala Slatina

"Yes, but this is different, and here the man can enforce obedience. If she does not want to listen to him, he may throw her away." -Reshetari girl aged 14-16, Byala Slatina

"They both decide about the number of children. The man listens to what the woman has to say, and they both make the decision." -Hristo Botev woman aged 40-60

"Well, we can discuss and talk, but it is the man who finally makes the decision. For example, if I'm pregnant and he wants me to abort the child, I will go and have an abortion. He is saying, 'Go,' and I may not want to abort but still I will. When he does not want the child, what can you do, you cannot quarrel and fight." - Vesselinovo woman aged 18-24

91. The choice of birth control is strongly linked to the agency of Roma women, and that comes from the community's norms and traditions. Roma women are able to opt for IUDs for birth control. Using option varies widely across the communities. About 50 percent of young women from Hristo Botev choose IUDs; whereas only 10 percent do so in Vesselinovo and Byala Slatina; and a mere 5 percent in Sheker Mahala. According to the FGDs, the resistance to using IUDs is related to (i) strong fears that IUDs lead to impaired

fertility in women, (ii) the concern that IUDs will lead women to sexually promiscuous behavior, (iii) men's wish to demonstrate sexual potency through pregnancy, and (iv) lack of information about (and the availability of) IUDs in the communities. While women's agency about the number children she has seems to be increasing, the prevailing social norms around masculinity (i.e. male sexual potency) makes abortions the most commonly used method of birth control in the four surveyed Roma communities. The quotes from a FGD with 18-24 year old women in Vesselinovo shows the level of agency they exercise:

- "Those women who do not want to have more children —go and get their (IUD) coils and have fears no longer. But most of them do not do that., They do not use such things. People were coming here to give us free IUDs, but we throw them out and do not use such things."
- "When I do not want more children and want to be safe, I take pills. What else can I do?"
- "People came here and asked us 'Do you want coils?' I want it because I do not want children."

4.2.3 Drivers of Change

92. Girls who pursue higher education tend to have more control over strategic life choices regarding their age at marriage or cohabitation and first pregnancy. In Byala Slatina, 18-24 year old Kalaydzhii women estimate that Roma women in their community have their first child between the ages of 18 and 22 years; however, those who continue with university education have their first child when they're 23-27 years old. This is in stark contrast to Roma women of Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, where the majority marry when they're about 15 years old.

93. Delayed marriage and pregnancy are associated with changes in the norms and values of relationships between young boys and girls. The increased age when a family starts leads to more tolerant attitudes towards premarital relationships. The value of virginity at marriage is becoming more flexible for girls with higher education in Hristo Botev and the younger Kalaydzhii group in Byala Slatina, and women are also becoming more open to casual relationships between men and women as quoted below:

- "It's not like it used to be – before, if you were with a boy you were supposed to get married immediately. It's not like that anymore." Hristo Botev woman aged 18-24 years
- "My Mom did it that way – she went out with my father when she was 16 and got married immediately. She had me at 17 and she wants me to avoid this, she wants to protect me. She wants another future for me. This year I'll be graduating from secondary school, I'll get my driving license, I'll apply for the university. I want to complete my

higher education. I don't want to get married before I graduate and find a job, but that does not mean that I'll never go out with a boy." -Hristo Botev woman aged 18-24 years

- "Virginity is still an important prerequisite for a good marriage, but not like it used to be. Now nobody expects the mother and the mother-in-law to dance with 'the honor' at the wedding, but it is better if you could show the parents that the girl was a virgin when she first slept with him – it is for their peace of mind." -Hristo Botev woman aged 18-24 years
- "Now women marry after completing high school, and many wait even until after 20-22 years, especially if they study at the university. Virginity is not as important anymore for girls or boys. It may still matter only for older people. My grandmother always says that she will break my legs if she hears that people are telling stories about me. My parents speak very much about this, especially now at the time of the graduation parties. Nowadays the mothers-in-law rarely dance with the wedding gown or the sheet of the virgin blood - this was the case for our parents only." -Kalaydzhii girl aged 14-16 years, Byala Slatina
- "I am 16 years old and I have never had a serious girlfriend. Sometimes I go out with a girl for a walk to the pastry shop, we dance at parties but this is not a serious relationship. That is valid for almost all of us. We want to finish our education and after that we can do something else." -Kalaydzhii boy aged 14-16 years, Byala Slatina
- "Sometimes boys and girls fall in love and begin to have sex. But that does not mean they have to get married. Some do that and drop out of school and continue to study after they marry, but most do not marry. If love is strong, they will marry after finishing their secondary education. In other cases they separate, but people start talking behind the girl's back, so most girls are very careful in what they do." -Kalaydzhii girl aged 14-16 years, Byala Slatina
- "For us Kalaydzhii girls, things have changed. With the adults, if there was a sexual relationship, they had to get married. Adults still hold to that, but it is not so for the young people." -Kalaydzhii girls aged 14-16 years, Byala Slatina

94. **In summary, social norms around marriage and pregnancy are changing across the Roma communities in varying degrees.** The young Roma are trying to cope with their constrained economic environment by opting to cohabit (marry informally) rather than formally marry their partners. This saves them from paying the administrative charges and does not stop the state-sponsored social benefit payments to single mothers. It also saves expenditures around marriage such as the ceremony and dowry. This is affecting social norms around commitment to the relationship and risks men abandoning women and moving on. Social norms around virginity at marriage, age at marriage, and first pregnancy are also

affected when young women *pursue* further education and aspire to have independent careers. Agency derived from education, as well as from the easing of conservative social norms and gender roles, is giving women to have more decision making powers, such as the number of children to have and their birth control strategies.

4.3. Employment

4.3.1 Social Norms Related to Employment

95. Roma men and women had a high employment rate in the past. The Roma were almost fully employed in the four studied neighborhoods prior to 1989, according to the study's qualitative work. A large proportion of them had jobs in steel, textile, food processing factories, and agricultural cooperatives during the communist regime. As discussed in Chapter 1 (Figures 1.4-1.7), however, the Roma were among the most severely affected by the transition economy and experienced a drastic drop in their employment rate. Across all four neighborhoods, people reported extreme difficulty in finding employment, and claim that about half of Roma men are employed in Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala. As few as 10 percent are employed in Vesselinovo, who can only find substantial work during the summer.³⁰ This implies that in the areas studied, the employment rates among Roma men are higher in urban areas, and lower in rural areas, compared to the national average for Roma men, which is 41 percent (Figure 1.4).

96. Despite difficulties, Roma women in Hristo Botev and Byala Slatina participate in the labor market, though they rarely do in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo. Women from Hristo Botev and Byala Slatina tend to not mind working outside their neighborhoods, as long as the work pays the transport. Byala Slatina women even consider migrating abroad on their own. In Sheker Mahala, women prefer to work in the neighborhood. Although women rarely work in Vesselinovo, interestingly, they are open to working outside the neighborhood, and make more money (200 leva per month) than men (about 80-90 leva per month) when they work, according to qualitative data.

97. The norm of “men as providers” is no longer able to thrive in the environment of persistent poverty and unemployment, and Roma women are increasingly stepping in to contribute to the family income through their employment. This is altering the respective gender roles of men and women, though not without a psychological toll on men, who seem to be more affected than women. This is because traditional values and social norms are still being used as the point of reference for strategic life choices. In all the

³⁰ Employment rates in Byala Slatina could not be estimated by the research participants.

surveyed communities, women reported that they are willing to take any job that is within their reach and covers their transportation costs. In more traditional communities (i.e. Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo), the husbands ultimately decide whether women work or not. They usually prefer women not to work outside of the neighborhood or after dark, in fear of other men approaching their wives. The majority of women in the age groups of 18 and 24 years and 40 and 60 years had at some point been employed as hygienists (cleaners)--a job that was relatively easy for them to find. In Byala Slatina, a significant number of girls from both the Reshetari (usually without any qualifications) and the Kalaydzhii (often with completed secondary education) Roma subgroups find work in the tobacco fields. Such incomes provide for substantial contributions to the family.

98. Construction work is the most common preferred job for Roma men across four communities, although it is no longer widely available. Small business (restaurant and store) owner, taxi driver, sales person, car mechanic, and security guard are also considered good occupations for men in urban areas (i.e. Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala). These are indeed among the most common types of occupation held by Roma people, according to the Roma Regional Survey data (EC/UNDP/WB 2011), which indicates that construction, trade, and services (tourism, restaurants, cafeteria, etc.) comprise about 30 percent of Roma employment. Among Kalaydzhii men in Byala Slatina, where the level of education achievement is higher than other neighborhoods studied, administrative work and any professional work are considered the best ways to make living. Men in Vesselinovo yearn for the cooperative farm work they had under the communist regime. Many men from the neighborhood now gather at a plaza every morning to look for day labor opportunities, but they are hesitant to work outside the village because of risk of non-payments. Men from Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo find it is humiliating to collect garbage, recyclable material, or clean streets. While young men (aged 18-24) from Sheker Mahala feel ashamed to work with horse carts, older men (aged 40-60) believe it is not a bad job. According to adolescents (aged 14-16), construction, car repairs, transportation of wood, and other physical labor is for men, while trade and agriculture are for both men and women. They think textile work is predominantly for women, but also for men.

99. Owning a small shop or a restaurant is an ideal job for many Roma women, especially in urban areas (Hristo Botev and Sheker Mahala). If owning a business is not possible, women from these neighborhoods see work as a cook, waitress, hairdresser, and sales person as attractive occupations. Working in textile and sewing factories are also considered good jobs for women. Roma women from rural areas (i.e. Byala Slatina and Vesselinovo), on the other hand, could not indicate any specific jobs they prefer to have. They said that they are struggling to find any job, even if it's just helping out neighbors with gardens or cleaning their stables. According to Roma women--although not common--prostitution, stealing, and drug dealing are considered worse ways to make a living, and collecting garbage is also

humiliating. The Roma believe it is easier for women to find employment in cleaning, cooking, and hair dressing, and perceive these as women's occupations.

100. **Migration led by women,--not just by men--is becoming a key strategy to generate incomes for families.** In all the surveyed communities except Vesselinovo, migration is currently the most effective way to cope with poverty. Byala Slatina reports the highest share of labor migration. At least one family member is working abroad in approximately 70 percent of the households according to the neighborhood questionnaire. Labor migration is also common in Hristo Botev with 30-60 percent of households participating in it; though in Sheker Mahala it is less pronounced as a way to make ends meet. As discussed in Chapter 3, when women migrate, it is often without their children and husband.³¹ As labor markets in Western Europe, particularly Greece and Cyprus, are contracting, the duration of migration has shortened from several years to several months for Roma men. Roma women, who largely work in domestic jobs such as childcare or taking care of the elderly, stay for longer periods abroad. This gender imbalance creates considerable tension inside families and the community. Byala Slatina reported more than 25 women have left their families to live abroad and have started new relationships. In the FGD, men expressed feelings of loss, loneliness, and abandonment by their wives. Adolescent boys (aged 14-16) from Hristo Botev argued against women's migration, pointing out the high risk of becoming prostitutes.

4.3.2 Agency to Make Strategic Life Choices on Employment

101. **The ability to make strategic life choices concerning employment is very limited for women and men in the Roma communities, frequently because of the scarcity of choices available to them and limited social networks in ethnic Bulgarian society.** This is true across all the four communities. In more conservative neighborhoods this constraint, in combination with traditional lifestyles, influences the Roma's choices about employment. As described in Chapter 1, the limited social networks remain a key factor limiting their options in the mainstream labor market. In Byala Slatina, the Kalaydzhii industrial workers who worked alongside ethnic Bulgarians--and nurtured a relationship with them--were able to use their social networks to find a new job, both in Bulgaria and abroad. Reshetari men, on the other hand, who worked in agricultural cooperatives before the transition --jobs where they did not work with ethnic Bulgarians--struggled more to find a new job.

102. **The majority of young Roma report that decisions about what to do after leaving school are mostly made independently, though there are not many choices.** The FGDs

³¹ In the case of Sheker Mahala, the Roma participants emphasized that only divorced or separated women migrate abroad without their husbands.

revealed that few viable choices are available after leaving school. Both men and women reported that they look for any work to contribute to the family income. Vesselinovo 18-24 year old men captured this situation when asked who decides what to do after school—they replied that “there is no choice,” “we are just trying to follow tradition but with more difficulties,” and “there are no jobs.” While most of the young women argued that they make decisions concerning their life after education, the women from Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo reported that their choices are rooted in traditional values and social norms (i.e. marrying early, having children, and staying at home).

103. The Roma cite discrimination against the Roma by the majority non-Roma population as a critical factor that heavily constraints their employment choices. This contrasts with the view of the general non-Roma population in Bulgaria, about 75 percent disagree that discrimination is a reason for the Roma’s unemployment.³² About 88 percent of the non-Roma population believe the negative stereotypes that the Roma are lazy, lack willpower, and prefer to live off social assistance instead of regular employment.³³ As noted in chapter 3, this labor market discrimination is an important de-motivating factor for Roma to continue their education. In Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo, the FGD participants blame the ethnic Bulgarians for always making excuses for not employing the Roma candidates regardless of their abilities, willingness, or performance. In Hristo Botev they said: “You inquire about the advertised job position. They tell you to go to an interview and when they see that you are Roma (or from the neighborhood) they kindly tell you that the position has been filled.” The 40-60 year old men from Vesselinovo lamented that relationships with ethnic-Bulgarians have deteriorated over the years, and that the ethnic-Bulgarians have become increasingly less supportive and helpful to them.

104. Limited qualifications make Roma less employable, and creating a vicious cycle as one becomes the explanation for the other. While over 90 percent of ethnic Bulgarians complete at least upper secondary education, only 21 percent of the Roma complete upper secondary education and less than 1 percent complete post-secondary education.³⁴ A great proportion of Roma do not have skilled work qualifications, but according to the FGDs, Roma men have been able to find employment without high educational qualifications in the past. According to the EC/UNDP/WB 2011 Roma Regional Survey data, 53 percent of employed Roma are unskilled workers while only 13 percent of the non-Roma population do so (no disaggregated figure for men was available). Younger men are less qualified despite

³² de Laat and Danchev, 2012

³³ de Laat and Danchev, 2012

³⁴ de Laat and Danchev, 2012.

slightly more years spent in school because the older generation of Roma men received military training. In fact, while 67 percent of non-Roma men complete upper secondary school, only 39 percent of Roma men do. The limited qualifications of Roma stand in the way of their employment opportunities in the new economy. Students in Vesselinovo and Sheker Mahala have the lowest learning achievements, little knowledge of Bulgarian, and suffer from unemployment.

4.3.3 Drivers of Change

105. **Women’s higher education generates new values to their employment and is changing the outlook of their role in family life.** Roma women who are pursuing higher education do not view their work as a mere means to earn additional income, but it is a form of their self-expression. Female university students from Hristo Botev, for instance, insist that women have the right to realize their professional activities in equal terms as men. Among such Roma communities, the norm of the “good wife” is accommodating their own employment as well as their ability to balance work with family obligations. More notably, young Kalaydzhi women and female university students from Hristo Botev are beginning to expect more involvement from their partners and husbands in household chores and in raising children. Young and educated men also reflect these new attitudes, increasingly ready to renegotiate the distribution of family duties, child care, and household chores. A participant of the FGD remarked, “Men have to be engaged in more domestic work, especially in taking care of their children. Women with higher education need more support from their husbands to have a good career.”

106. **In summary, many Roma women are increasingly stepping up to fill the economic void created by unemployed men in the domestic sphere.** Only a few younger women are ready to migrate, and increasingly they are willing to pursue higher education. Education is providing an increasing share of young women the agency to enhance their life choices, and this is expanding the characteristics of the traditional norm of the “good girl” and the “good wife.” Men will need to invest more in education and networking to regain their eroding place in the labor market. Those few young men who are able to invest in these areas will make progress.

Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks and Areas for Policy Development

107. **This chapter will return to the key research questions and revisit features of the Roma communities, focusing on areas where more research could be undertaken to develop relevant policies.** This study reflects on the types of policy interventions that might harness elements of changing Roma communities to aid social inclusion.
108. **Understanding both the internal social dynamics of Roma communities and how they interact with wider Bulgarian society is an ambitious task and requires tremendous anthropological depth, insight, and resources.** The current study only scratches the surface of the traditions and behaviors of individuals and groups in the four communities. Hence a clear conclusion that norms, agency, and strategic choices are directly correlated can be simplistic and misleading. A range of economic and social variables is at play for any Roma individual, and are not the same for everyone. This study captures the four communities in a period of change, making difficult any generalizations or theories of norms, agency, and choices about the Roma in Bulgaria.
109. **In pursuing its research questions, this study demonstrates the link between social norms, agency, and strategic life choices.** It establishes that key gender social norms influence the agency of women and men, which in turn influences their strategic life decisions. These influences vary from being a loose relation with little impact to being a determining factor, all while significant change is affecting the four Roma communities. As this study notes, the three gender related social norms of “men are providers,” “men are superior to women,” and “virginity before marriage enhances the social status of women” are undergoing changes, widening the gap between “what is proclaimed” and “what is practiced.” This study shows how agency changes depending on the factors that the Roma communities are encountering, such as poverty, the lifestyles of the dominant society, the education system, the nature of employment, parental support, etc. These, in turn, influence the strategic decisions of Roma women and men in the areas of education, employment, and marriage.
110. **This study exposes how key gender based social norms have a bearing on agency and strategic life choices, which eventually aid or impede the Roma’s social inclusion.** By investigating the factors that influence the strategic life choices made by Roma men and women, this study reveals some of the key reasons behind the decisions and actions made by Roma men and women that affect their social inclusion. Policymakers perceive this study’s three strategic life choices as key challenges to the social inclusion of Roma men and women

in Bulgaria. The three strategic life choices are: (i) low school enrollment, (ii) early marriage and pregnancy,³⁵ and (iii) low participation in the labor market. This study is conducted within a conceptual framework that is based on an assumption that strategic life choices are influenced by social norms and agency, and that social norms and agency also influence each other.

111. **The rigidity of the gender based norms varies by neighborhood**, however, some of the more salient ones are: (i) girls are pressured to marry at an early age, especially in traditional neighborhoods; (ii) wives are primarily responsible for undertaking household work and caring for children; (iii) daughters are expected to help their family with domestic work and taking care of siblings; (iv) parents want to protect the virginity of their daughters until marriage; (v) giving birth to children is a key quality of a good wife; (vi) men are considered superior to women and are primarily responsible for generating household income; and (vii) manliness (masculinity) is associated with sexual potency. Drawing from the discussions in the earlier chapters, the following paragraphs revisit and deepen our understanding of these norms, while also revealing the variations across the four communities.

112. **The pressure on girls to marry at an early age and the significant value attached to a bride's virginity leads to early marriages.** The pressure appears to originate from the belief that marriage is a proof of maturity, morality, beauty, and the appreciation of traditional values. Many girls fear that if they do not marry by a socially expected age, their integrity will be questioned and they might not ever be able to marry. The significant value attached to a bride's virginity also leads to early marriages. These beliefs and values appear to be stronger among girls in Vesselinovo, where the interaction between Roma girls and the non-Roma population is most limited. The pressure of early marriage and the value of virginity appear to be easing among Roma girls who have greater interactions with the non-Roma population, such as Kalaydzhi girls from Byala Slatina who pursue higher education and Djorevtsi girls from Hristo Botev who have studied in integrated schools outside their neighborhoods.

113. **A wife's extensive household chores and the expectations that daughters will help with these tasks discourage girls from pursuing higher education.** In communities where wives are expected to stay home to manage housework and take care of their family, marriage often means the end of education for Roma girls. With the heavy workload, they

³⁵ While this study notes that early marriage and pregnancy are widely perceived by policymakers as a challenge to social inclusion of the Roma, they is not intended to interfere with traditional values and customs of Roma communities.

would not have time for school; and even if they did, they could not neglect their household requirements. This is true of most of the neighborhoods studied, except for the Kalaydzhii community in Byala Slatina. Unmarried girls who are burdened with family and domestic work find it difficult to continue education, unless dismissed from such responsibilities as observed among the Kalaydzhii girls in Byala Slatina and some Djorevtsi girls pursuing higher education in Hristo Botev.

114. **The significant value attached to the virginity of brides leads parents of adolescent girls to pull their daughters out of school.** Under such circumstances, Roma girls' ability to make strategic life choices (agency) related to education is constrained. Many parents do not permit their daughters who have reached puberty (at around age 13-14 years) to attend school, because they fear their girls will come in close contact with boys. Parents are concerned about the safety of their daughters in commuting (being approached by men while commuting); or parents do not want their daughters to be in contact with boys at all. Such concerns warrant further examination of the implications of (a) ensuring the safety of commuting to school; and (b) the availability of girls-only schools for Roma girls. In either case, a policy that pays attention to the social concerns around the value of virginity could have significant impacts on the inclusion of Roma women, since it is the fear of losing virginity that has constrained their agency to continue education and have access to further economic opportunities.
115. **Early pregnancies are promoted by the significance of a man's masculinity (sexual potency) and the importance of fertility (early pregnancies) for a "good wife."** These values make marriage almost synonymous with pregnancy for Roma couples, and make marriage synonymous with ending formal schooling. Pregnancy and child rearing result in the inability of Roma girls to continue education. Moreover, marriage also means the end of schooling for Roma boys who need to provide for the family.
116. **While Roma women are increasingly expected to contribute to the family income often due to poverty, the inability to generate an income does not reflect negatively on them.** While the inability of men to generate sufficient income could be considered a "failure," women's unemployment is not considered as such. For many young women in the rural neighborhood of Vesselinovo, where women have not been employed in a long time, employment is perceived to be something remote. However, in communities where Roma women are increasingly receiving higher education, women's work is viewed as a form of self-expression, rather than merely a means to earn additional income. Furthermore, migrant women, regardless of the gender-norms held by Roma men and women, appear to find jobs abroad more easily than men as housemaids and cleaners.
117. **The findings do not yield hard conclusions on how agency influences strategic life choices of Roma men and women.** While the study is able to concretely observe

correlations between the level of agency and strategic life choices made by Roma women; it is not able to determine the causalities of these correlations. The study notes that assertive Roma women who challenge the traditional social and gender norms tend to: (1) have higher aspirations to complete secondary and post-secondary education; (2) postpone their marriage and pregnancy until after completing education; (3) participate in the labor market and have a professional career; (4) leave their community behind to continue higher education and find employment; and (5) renegotiate distribution of familial responsibilities with their husbands. In Byala Slatina, the agency of women is associated with their level of education, and women with higher education demonstrate greater awareness of their rights. But the study does not reveal whether it is higher education that empowers women, or if agency enables women to pursue higher education. One of the key unanswered questions is: what fosters the social norms in Byala Slatina or parts of Hristo Botev that encourage Roma girls to continue onto secondary and higher education? A deeper investigation, as mentioned earlier, is required to analyze the causations of these correlations and social norms.

118. **Agency seems to be self-enforcing.** While the study does not generate sufficient evidence to clearly conclude that agency is self-enforcing, it does, however, note that increments in the level of agency are self-enforcing. The findings suggest that the supporting environment gives Kalaydzhi women in Byala Slatina the agency to continue with higher education, and subsequently higher education increases their ability to take on more assertive roles in their social, economic, and family life. The findings, however, do not explain what makes the supporting environment available.³⁶ Further research would be worthwhile on how such supporting environments can be created to generate this cycle.

119. **Social norms appear to be changing at a faster rate in parts of Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev, compared to Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo.** Vesselinovo, the most rural and segregated neighborhood among the four, seems to most preserve traditional values and norms. Key factors explaining this are (i) the language barrier (i.e. most of the Roma in the community do not speak Bulgarian); and (ii) the level of economic interaction with non-Roma population (i.e. the majority of the Roma does not interact much with ethnic Bulgarians). The Roma in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev speak Bulgarian fluently, and a good number even speak it at home. The Roma in Sheker Mahala and Vesselinovo typically do not have a strong command of Bulgarian. While the majority of the Roma in Hristo Botev

³⁶ The supporting environment observed in this study mainly consisted of having parents who are strongly committed to supporting their daughters' education, including through (i) enrollment in integrated primary and secondary schools; (ii) working abroad to send remittances home to finance higher education; and (iii) permitting their daughters to contribute less in household chores.

cannot imagine survival without speaking Bulgarian, most of the Roma in Vesselinovo can get by without a good command of Bulgarian. Past and current economic interaction with the non-Roma population in Byala Slatina and Hristo Botev seems to be influencing the social norms of Roma in these neighborhoods. In Byala Slatina, the Kalaydzhi subgroup, who had more intimate interaction when working in factories with ethnic-Bulgarians during the communist regime, appear to share more social norms with ethnic-Bulgarians, compared to their Reshetari counterparts who had less interaction. It is possible that in the rural neighborhood of Vesselinovo, where the livelihood of most of the Roma population depends on subsistence agriculture, the interaction with non-Roma population is neither frequent nor necessary when compared with the Roma in Hristo Botev.

120. **In an attempt to determine how agency influences strategic life choices, and how social norms and agency interact, this study reveals that additional factors (i.e. the socioeconomic conditions of Roma households and communities, and the Roma communities' surrounding dominant socioeconomic Bulgarian culture) are playing significant roles in influencing strategic life choices.**³⁷ The interaction of traditional and modern, as well as “the proclaimed” and “the practiced” gender roles are shaping relations between the sexes, members of the family, and the community at large. The tensions involved in these interaction risk domestic and community conflict, abandonment of family members and the community, and so forth. Poverty, as an underlying factor, remains instrumental in shaping social norms and gender roles as well as the availability of choices.
121. **Any approach to integrating the Roma would require an urgent focus on poverty, or the effort would be ineffective.** Poverty is affecting Roma communities in different ways—changing community norms and household dynamics; inducing migration for jobs and a better life; and the absorbing benefits and services (i.e. education) from the Bulgarian society. This study shows that changes in social norms and agency in Roma communities are observed by: (1) increased demand for women to generate income; (2) an increase in the cases of serial monogamy; (3) declining authority of men in the family; (4) older generations' reduced ability to support and exercise influence over young couples, while young couples are becoming more dependent on their support; and (5) increased number of inhabitants in the same household. This study witnesses the adverse impact of unemployment and the absence of resources that is pushing members of the Roma into socially unacceptable, sometimes illegal, behavior that strengthen stereotypes of the Roma. These stereotypes support practices of discrimination and prejudices (as mentioned earlier). In turn these might

³⁷ As determined by their unemployment, extent of access to resources and services

affect strategies to integrate the Roma into mainstream society, as well as their participation in the labor market.

122. **Roma women and men are affected differently by poverty, social norms, and agency. Depending on the context, either women or men are at a relative disadvantage to each other.** For example, the inability of men to live up to the proclaimed role of “the provider” erodes their agency. And a majority of middle aged and older men are among the most frustrated and unhappy across the communities. Women’s education and adoption of new lifestyles (i.e. challenging traditional social norms by young women) can boost their agency relative to men. In turn, this agency can propel women to seek (additional) education or employment, including through leaving the country. Stress due to the shifting norms and roles enhance the risk of domestic and community = conflicts, not just between men and women but also within sexes.
123. **The challenges of overcoming ethnic discrimination in many areas of life, limited educational qualifications, and a diminished social network among the ethnic Bulgarian continue to be barriers for employment.** The discrimination that comes with prejudices and stereotypes is a demotivating factor for the Roma. According to a number of Roma men in the four communities, the relationship between the Roma and ethnic Bulgarians deteriorated after the transition, and has created additional challenges in accessing the labor market. Increasingly, both men and women are choosing to migrate. As this study shows, most of the labor-driven migrations appear to benefit women more than men, since the former are able to generate more agency than men in Roma communities that are undergoing change. An initial step in a policy focused on Roma inclusion would be to address the discrimination of the Roma across both Bulgaria and the larger European region where the Roma live and move.
124. **There are tensions between those who seek to cope by adopting new practices (roles) and those who want to preserve traditional roles and values.** Tensions are observed between husbands and wives, between generations, and within sexes. Tensions seem to emerge when the position of older generations (both male and female) and men of all age groups are adversely impacted within both the family and community. For men, it is often the sense of failure humiliation, and frustration that create great sensitivity to criticism. This, in turn, leads to heightened tensions and a strong resistance to any challenges to their roles and values. This challenge to authority generates even more stress in the absence of Roma men’s ability to generate income. Men’s position in the society is not only threatened by the lack of income, but also by their reduced ability to create social capital through investing in social events and other social commitments. For the older generation, frictions are mainly due to increased interaction (due to inter-generational cohabitation) and their inability to (financially) support and exercise influence over young couples (their children and in-laws). Although young couples are increasingly more dependent on the support of their parents.

While women seem to benefit on the surface from such shifting social norms, in practice this is not the case because poverty makes it virtually impossible for women to take advantage of the changing values and practices.

125. **New strategies to cope with poverty and the tensions from changing social norms come with additional risks of social exclusion for the Roma.** In this study, Roma women reconfirmed the key risks of social exclusion, including: (1) lack of legal protection in case of separation from their partner; (2) increased friction in the family (possibly leading to domestic violence); (3) trends of early withdrawal from secondary schools due to puberty and early marriage; (4) challenges to labor market participation, including lack of demand, lack of qualifications, and the high demand to undertake household tasks; and (5) possible higher vulnerability to exploitation because of an increased need and pressure to generate income. Key risks for Roma men include: (1) high unemployment rate because of a lack of market and insufficient qualifications; (2) early withdrawal from secondary education due to a mix of supply and demand side factors; (3) declined ability to invest in social capital through social events and commitments; and (4) loss of role in social and familial life, manifested in a loss of self-esteem and an increased level of emotional vulnerability. These risks must be addressed by taking into account gender, changing gender roles, and evolving social norms, as well as opportunities associated with them.
126. **Gender-focused and social norm focused policies are likely to support many communities in integration into mainstream society while simultaneously increasing Roma women's bargaining power inside the family.** Policies that raise awareness of family planning as well as protect family members from violence and the infringement of rights would be desirable to reduce the risk of domestic abuse and violence. Another area for consideration would be policies that increase Roma women's access to legal protection in case of separation, since cohabitation without marriage is increasing. Reducing vulnerabilities could come about with gender focused social assistance programs for single mothers; children of separated or divorced parents; mothers-in-law or mothers who provide care to grandchildren (young children abandoned by their parents); and the physically challenged. In all cases, the authorities would need to ensure that any such policy is not misused or used to promote perverse behavior.
127. **In light of the new risks, changing social norms, and household dynamics, this study recommends exploring policy options in the following areas:** (1) support household members in assuming new roles; (2) address new forms of vulnerability inside Roma communities; and (3) increase opportunities in education and employment. The proposed policy options are directly linked to and should contribute to the implementation of the priorities detailed in Bulgaria's National Roma Integration Strategy, in particular the following operational objectives of the NRIS: (i) enrolling and retaining all Roma children in the educational system and ensuring they receive a high quality education in a multicultural

environment; (ii) ensuring equal access to quality healthcare services and preventive programs; (iii) improving the Roma's access to the labor market and raising Roma employment rates; and (iv) guaranteeing citizen rights, with an emphasis on the rights of women and children. At the same time, this report cautions against applying these recommendations exclusively to the Roma, since such an approach could generate negative perceptions of the Roma by the general public. While many of these policies might need to be customized to suit the specific contexts, it is recommended that they be applied equally to other vulnerable and marginalized population in Bulgaria to avoid stigmatization of the Roma.

(1) Support household members in assuming new roles:

- **Create safe and enabling working environments for women.** In order to enable women to participate in the labor market as they desire, obstacles and conflicting responsibilities—such as childcare and high transportation costs—need to be reduced. Such obstacles can be reduced by introducing:
 - (a) Affordable and accessible childcare facilities for Roma parents;³⁸
 - (b) Safe and accessible public transport to facilitate commuting, especially after dark; and
 - (c) Incentives for private companies that provide enabling working environments for women (including childcare support and safe transport provisions).³⁹
- **Provide more accessible options and information about family planning.** This study observed that lack of active family planning (and its resulting early pregnancy) often leads to curtailed years of education for both Roma men and women. This minimizes their livelihood options and reduces their ability to undertake evolving roles. Increasing awareness about the consequences of early pregnancy and improving the accessibility of different family planning methods could help young Roma couples better cope with shifting social economic conditions. The services could be provided through social workers from the communities, who are familiar with the social contexts and are trusted by the Roma. Possible actions include:

³⁸ Male respondents from Sheker Mahala noted that it is acceptable to keep their children in childcare facilities, only if mothers are employed.

³⁹ This option is less popular among the Roma, since they fear that this could possibly result in affecting their wages and other entitlements.

- (a) Provision of community-level, Roma-sensitive family planning services that actively reach out to and educate Roma men and women about family planning;
 - (b) Introduction of a wider range of contraceptives (beyond IUDs) available to Roma women at the community level; and
 - (c) Inclusion of reproductive education in school curriculum to better inform young people about family planning.
- **Provide advisory support and counseling services.** New single mothers and fathers, working mothers, and husbands of working mothers would benefit from a specialized service that would facilitate their transition to and uptake of new roles. A helpline, for example, could be established to instantly respond to their questions. Such services could be provided by a team of both Roma and non-Roma social workers. The former can ensure a good understanding of the local context, while the latter can ensure confidentiality of the service users.
 - **Develop targeted programs for adolescent Roma men and women to support them with making strategic life choices in the context of social and economic change.** Adolescents and young adults would benefit from programs and support structures that help them negotiate the tension created by their aspirations for new lifestyles and traditional norms inside their family and the community. Support structures could assist with the identification of coping mechanisms for the individuals, their families, and their communities.

(2) Address new forms of vulnerability inside Roma communities:

- **Review and adjust the distorted incentive structures of social assistance programs, particularly around the social status of beneficiaries.** Since social assistance programs are often designed and delivered in a way that affects the behaviors of the Roma people—often resulting in suppressing the agency of Roma women and thereby increasing their vulnerability—they should be reviewed and corrected to remove these unintended effects. This report emphasized that these programs should not be reviewed only in the context of Roma beneficiaries, but among all beneficiaries, in order to avoid stigmatization of the Roma. Effective communication of any changes in social assistance programs would also be necessary to avoid misinterpretations. The social assistance programs to be reviewed include:
 - (a) Social assistance for single mothers, which discourages formal marriage of Roma couples and makes Roma women and children vulnerable in the case of separation;
 - (b) Social assistance for children of divorced parents, since complex application procedures (often entailing legal procedures) make receiving assistance extremely

difficult. Women often prefer to stay legally single to secure eligibility to social assistance for single mothers, rather than risking separation and having to enroll in social assistance for children of divorced parents; and

(c) Pension structures protecting mothers, which, despite reforms, is still providing distorted incentives for young women to bear children in order to qualify for child allowance and other benefits towards their pension.

- **Increase legal protections in case of separation.** Since cohabitation without marriage is increasing, it is important to increase the legal protection that men, women, and their children receive in case of a separation from their partner (guardians other than biological partners may need to be considered as well).

(3) Increase opportunities in education and employment:

- **Introduce measures to offset the opportunity costs of education and increase the return on investment in education.** These measures include:

(a) Incentives for Roma children to attend kindergarten/pre-school and learn the Bulgarian language before entering first grade; thereby increasing their educational achievements.⁴⁰ These incentives could be either financial or non-financial, and could be further coordinated with existing programs. Conditions attached to child allowance, for example, could be refined to increase Roma families' investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD);

(b) Provision of safe and affordable transportation for Roma students to attend school—this would increase both the boys' and girls' attendance, especially in neighborhoods isolated from secondary schools;

(c) Creation of school/learning environments compatible to the social norms and values of Roma people, especially girls (e.g. related to the safety of adolescent girls, convenience of class hours);⁴¹

(d) Incentives and mechanisms to ensure higher performance of schools in Roma neighborhoods. Possible measures include performance-based funding and salaries to give additional incentives for schools and teachers to improve the learning performance

⁴⁰ The importance of preschool is highlighted in the new National Strategy for the Integration of Roma (2012-2020), but early childhood development is not included in the strategy as one of its operational objectives. Similarly, early childhood education is not given much attention to in the National Strategy or National Action Plan.

⁴¹ These measures should avoid creating segregation of Roma students.

of the students enrolled in their school.⁴² To avoid distorted results, it is important to ensure that the performance is monitored with transparency and integrity in a verifiable fashion;

(e) Reassessment of the adequacy of social assistance programs, taking account of the costs of schooling, including opportunity costs. Even when social assistance covers schooling costs, if the opportunity cost of attending school exceeds the amount of social assistance attached to the conditional school attendance, students might be tempted to prioritize the opportunity over school attendance. It is important to reassess the right balance between the amount of social assistance and the opportunity cost; and

(f) Enforcement of tougher school attendance policies. School attendance (both the time and days) should be monitored more rigorously with verifiable evidence and with possible penalties for over-reporting.⁴³ The integrity of school attendance is key to ensuring that conditional social assistance programs and other incentives yield the intended results.

- **Address negative stereotypes and discrimination against the Roma in the labor market.** Specific actions include communications campaigns and development of educational tools (to be used in schools and work places) to combat negative stereotypes, both of which need to be addressed by the entire society. Joint activities or projects that require collaboration between the Roma and non-Roma could also be introduced to encourage increased interaction and understanding.

128. **The Roma need to be actively involved in conceiving and implementing integration policies and programs that serve their best interests.** This study reveals that there is work to be done to better understand the Roma at the household and community levels in terms of their interest for their families and community going forward. Currently it seems that policies often fail in responding to the particular challenges that Roma communities face, or are not addressing them adequately. Actively involving the Roma communities (including Roma women) in developing and implementing policies and programs would not only improve the quality of the policies but also increase their impact on the ground. Furthermore, empirical studies need to be undertaken to learn about the internal dynamics relating to social norms, gender roles, decision making, and tensions around social change. This information would

⁴² The Roma participants in this study suggested providing these incentives on a premium-basis, as opposed to punitive-basis, since punitive measures could further discourage teachers. It would require the budget for the respective year to include sufficient resources to fund these incentives.

⁴³ Roma participants underscored that this should not imply penalties on absenteeism. Regular attendance should be positively rewarded through incentive mechanisms such as conditional cash transfers, rather than punishing absenteeism.

enable stakeholders to better understand the issues and the barriers to the development and integration of the Roma communities.

129. **To increase uptake and impact of Roma inclusion measures, policies and programs need to take into account the diversity of Roma communities in Bulgaria, using locally customized approaches facilitated by community workers and mediators.** This study demonstrates that any policy or program that aims to integrate the Roma into the wider Bulgarian or European society would need to examine the social and economic dynamics of Roma communities as well as the high levels of diversity across these communities (including distinct identity, urban or rural location, cultural constitution, traditions, social norms, access to employment, the state of infrastructure and education, health and other services, and so forth). Roma communities are changing, influenced by the dominant surrounding society and the transition of the Bulgarian economy. This study indicates that the change in each of the four communities is happening at different rates and in different ways. While there may not be a one size fits all approach to social integration, there are certain common challenges that need to be urgently addressed such as discrimination, unemployment, and education. Investing in community workers that are intimately familiar with the Roma neighborhoods they work in will likely make an enormous difference in the way social inclusion policies reach communities. These workers bring a special understanding of the Roma and can help in tending to; their customs and traditions; real or perceived barriers that exist in accessing social services; and have developed a relationship of trust with key community members.
130. **Extensive communications and awareness campaigns would also be required to enhance the uptake of new policies and services directed toward the Roma.** The FGDs conducted during this study revealed the Roma's significant lack of confidence and trust in state institutions, which could become a serious obstacle for the Roma to access much needed and available services. Communications campaigns could win the confidence and trust of Roma communities, including through demonstration of successful practices (e.g. pilot projects) among other Roma groups. The Bulgarian society at large would also need to be targeted by communications campaigns prior to the introduction of new services or policies, so that the society-wide benefits of the services and policies could be known and gain wide support.
131. **Further research must be undertaken in a way that does not enhance Roma stereotypes among the non-Roma.** Questions commonly posed by the non-Roma majority subliminally draw from such prejudices. Examples include: why do Roma girls marry young? Why do they get pregnant at a very young age? Why do the Roma have a lot of children? Why are Roma women exposed to high levels of prostitution and trafficking? Why are the Roma engaged in crime? Why are Roma men not interested in employment? Why do the Roma live close together and in suboptimal conditions? How can we stop the Roma from

migrating illegally to Western Europe? The solutions offered by either policy measures or by research on the Roma offer recommendations that lie in such as infrastructural development or urban planning; upgrading of Roma housing; immigration reform; integrated schools; etc. These are often short-sighted and have limited impact. This study of just four communities reveals how complex the development challenges are, and that the Roma are coping not just with poverty, but a variety of adverse forces both within and external to their society. More integrated, rather than piecemeal solutions; and more socially adaptive rather than rigid interventions, would go far in terms of development impact towards social inclusion. If the Roma are permitted to lead in conceiving development solutions (working together with the authorities, donors, and well-wishers)—and if all involved are patient, sensitive, and flexible—the goal of an inclusive society will be reached faster.

132. **Lastly, this study was not able examine the link between the strategic life choices of Roma people and their own involvement (i.e. being victims of crimes, violence, and trafficking) as initially intended.** Due to the sensitivity of information involved, the qualitative research methodology used for this study—namely FGDs—was not suitable to generate an environment where men and women felt comfortable sharing their perspectives on this subject. Although the study adjusted FGD questions to collect available information on this delicate topic through nuanced and indirect questions, they yielded limited information. A specialized study would be required to more adequately examine this topic. It would need to involve a more targeted inquiry method, by identifying informants that have been directly affected by the issue and through a more personal interview-like approach that ensures confidentiality, trust, and the safety of participants. Moreover, since this issue is cross-border in nature, it would require a multi-country research approach with a comprehensive research methodology.

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