

ROMA IN TURKEY:
DISCRIMINATION,
EXCLUSION DEEP POVERTY
AND DEPRIVATION



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DEEP POVERTY AND
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IN MEMORY OF HİLAL KÜEY

HİLAL KÜEY: “THE LAWYER OF ROMA”



We have lost Hilal Küey, the “Lawyer of Roma” on July 27, 2021..

As a result of numerous legal cases she had filed since 2007, until the day she passed away, she succeeded in having the Sulukule Gentrification Project cancelled twice. More recently, she filed a lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights against the Turkish Ministry of Culture which was responsible for the unlawful demolitions under the gentrification project. However, in the absence of a court verdict for the stay of execution at the beginning of the legal procedures, the neighborhood had already been demolished and new residences had been built.

“We didn’t lose the case, but we lost the neighborhood,” Küey said, to summarize the process.

In 2008, she defended Roma rights in the legal action brought against the ultra-nationalist Turkic Social Nation Association which started a campaign “for the discontinuation of the population growth of Kurds and Gypsies”.

Aside, she undertook the defense of a Romani person who was a victim of an attempted lynching in Selendi district of Manisa. However, she couldn’t continue with the case due to her health condition, but she contributed a great deal in advancing the legal process.

One of her victories in defense of the Roma was her winning the 12-year legal case of Yüksel Dum, a Romani man, whose house was unlawfully demolished in Ataşehir, İstanbul.

Both as the representative of the İzmir Bar Association and as an individual lawyer, she gave legal support to the Allinoi Initiative Group set up against the Yortanlı Irrigation Dam Project which was to engulf the Allinoi Antique City. She served for a term as the spokesperson for the group.

“Allinoi is in fact a legal matter. Transmitting the cultural heritage to next generations is not only a cultural question but also a legal question, because it’s the coming generations’ rights to acknowledge, recognize and protect the cultural wealth. Where there is an issue of right, the bar association is directly involved”, said Küey, pointing out the connection between cultural heritage and law.

The Allinoi Case went on for many years, the construction of the dam and the submergence of this irreplaceable wealth under the water could not be prevented, but the huge efforts have already been engraved in the public memory as an example of a joint struggle of the civil society with the support of the archaeological team working on the site.

Küey also followed up several cases brought to the European Court of Human Rights. She was also one of the leading architects of the World Tribunal on Iraq, one of the three lawyers who drew up the international indictment. Her contribution to the Tribunal demonstrated what an indefatigable peace activist she was.

Throughout her law career, Hilal Küey participated in many conferences as a speaker, highlighted the discrimination and human rights violations that victimized the Roma, and she provided free legal counselling to a large numbers of Roma.

Upon graduating from the İstanbul Faculty of Law, Hilal Küey started working as a lawyer in 1980 in İzmir. Following her employment at the Tekel Company, she and her husband, Latif Küey, started their own law firm and she continued her career as a freelance lawyer.

Between 1998 and 2000, she served as the first female Secretary General at the İzmir Bar Association and led the way to the foundation of the Internship Training Center there.

The Roma and human rights advocates will never forget Hilal Küey’s struggle for justice..

Derya Nüket Özer

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010, on the heels of Roma civic mobilization, and as part of the ill-fated EU accession process, the Turkish government launched the Roma Democratic Opening Process. Launched by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at a massive gathering in a sports stadium in Istanbul, this event and Erdoğan's speech was considered by many as an historic turning point for Roma in Turkey. The Prime Minister famously declared, "If there is an apology, the Romani people in Turkey deserve it. I apologize to them on behalf of the State." In terms of recognition, discriminatory depictions of Roma in the Police Regulations as a group 'prone to commit crimes' and classifying them as a security risk were removed.

Prior to this civil mobilization in the 2000s and the subsequent 'opening', Roma in Turkey were "largely invisible due to their weak ties with the state, an absence of civil organizations that represent them, and their non-appearance in political institutions."¹ What followed was increased visibility and awareness of discrimination against Roma; a proliferation of Romani NGOs and a flurry of participation; and public acceptance of the need for inclusion policies covering the priorities of health, housing, education and employment. The report examines the reasons why this recognition did not translate into progress on the ground for Roma.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the situation of what constitutes one of the most disadvantaged populations in Turkey, estimated to number anywhere between one half and two million; it examines the deeply-rooted exclusion, discrimination and poverty Roma face; and analyses the impact of state policies on Roma in the politically turbulent years since the Roma Opening.

Especially since 2016, politics in Turkey has been characterized by deep polarization and wide-ranging crackdowns on critics and opponents of the regime; the removal of checks and balances in tandem with an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of President Erdoğan; and a deepening economic crisis. This combination of factors has proven not to be propitious for policies promoting Roma inclusion, and has led Freedom House to characterize Turkey as 'not free'.²

Through a range of interviews with actively engaged Roma and non-Roma, the report examines how social segregation persists in informal social life, and how Roma face everyday racism in their dealings with officialdom, service providers and local authorities. Romani women activists provided vivid accounts of their own personal experiences of discrimination in education, which is systemic, and as in other countries, children are enrolled in so-called 'Roma schools'. One recalled how her grandfather bribed the authorities to enrol her in the school with the Turkish children:

"My friends who were enrolled in the other school could not succeed, most of them dropped out. The conditions were harsh in their school, it lacked hygiene, the teachers were tough and rude. The classes were crowded, three students had to squeeze in a desk. I would not have wanted to study at that school."

Even more disturbing was the opinion of one expert that the level of education for Roma has actually declined over the last decade:

"The situation is terrible. 10 years ago, we were complaining about drop-outs of high school. Now, they are hardly going to elementary school. The physical conditions of schools are insufficient. They do not have art,

¹<https://ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022: Turkey*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022>

music, or gym teachers. If they had teachers putting effort into these areas, they could discover talents. School directors, teachers, even cleaning personnel are discriminating and humiliating the Roma students.

In addition to high rates of early marriage in impoverished Romani communities, and high rates of drop-out and early school leaving, there is a widening skepticism among community members about the merits of higher education. This is prompted by the severe economic crisis as well as the experience of discrimination, which according to the interviewees, has left its mark on the younger generation, who now see that third level study offers no guarantee of economic stability.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the “extreme exposure of excluded and marginalized Roma communities to negative health and socioeconomic impacts”.³ Similar to other countries the digital divide and the lack of internet access meant that home schooling for most Romani pupils, effectively meant no schooling. Beyond education, the economic fallout of the pandemic spelled disaster and, according to Hacer Foggo, founder of the *Deep Poverty Network*, created a new low for those people in deep poverty:

“We do not only help the Roma, but we also help all people in deep poverty. But the problems are the same: they are all suffering from hunger. These people were already poor, but now are they fighting hunger every single day. I saw people who cannot afford to buy diapers for their babies, wrapping them with plastic bags.”

Foggo also noted that during the pandemic, families who could not pay their rents were forced out of their homes, and had to move in with relatives, amid a worsening of an already critical housing situation. Over the last 10 years, programs of ‘forced gentrification’ have led to forced eviction and mass demolitions of Romani neighborhoods, of which the clearance of the centuries-old Sulukule settlement was the most notorious example. The report also details incidents of pogrom-style attacks by violent mobs on Romani neighborhoods that resulted in injuries and mass destruction of property, forcing Roma to flee their homes.

Evictions, gentrification clearances and ‘lynching’ episodes that result in forced displacement of families and communities exact a harsh emotional toll on children, traumatized by violence, who then find themselves homeless, and on-the-move, their friendships and education disrupted. Strategies and policies have paid scant attention to the rights and well-being of Romani children.

Beyond the exigencies of the pandemic and the devastating impact it had on those Roma working in the gig economy, or dependent on precarious, irregular work, interviewees said that the main obstacles to employment were prejudice and discrimination. Despite being integrated and educated, many Roma face prejudices based on the neighborhood they come from, their skin color and their attire. Many hide their ethnic identity in their workplaces or when applying for jobs. One described his ‘heartbreak’ whenever he faces discrimination:

“When you build trust, you come out, and then their behaviors change. They correct what you say, they make fun of what you say, they claim not to believe the things you say, even though they know these things to be true. You cannot make sense of it ... but in time you realize what’s going on.”

The report highlights issues around access to justice and relations with the police and military, who perceive Roma as criminals and a security threat, a community to be profiled and controlled. The tensions between the security apparatus and the Roma community are explored in the context of the controversy surrounding the death of Caner Sarmaşık, a 20-year-old Romani conscript, while serving in Syria in 2021.

³https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030_0.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

The report provides a vivid account of the flourishing and fissuring of Roma civil society from the founding of the first explicitly Roma association, *Edirne Romanlar Derneği (EDROM)* in 2004. Until 2013 there had a rapid expansion of civil society in Turkey as a result of the country's significant efforts in the EU accession process, and this 'wind of change' had an impact on Roma self-organization. In 2012, *Roma Rights Forum (ROMFO)* was founded; a rights-based platform comprised of four Roma federations and 60 Roma associations. In 2015, the first ever Roma MP, Özcan Purçu was elected to parliament, from Republican People's Party (CHP). In the 2018 elections, the ruling Justice and Development Party fielded a Roma candidate Cemal Bekle, who was elected to parliament.

In April 2016, the government adopted *The National Strategy Paper and Action Plan on the Social Inclusion for Roma People*, which the European Commission called 'a positive step forward'. The strategy's fundamental goals were to improve the living conditions and socio-economic status of Roma people and to ensure they have access to basic public services. It came complete with mentions of the involvement of civil society and Roma communities, and a stress on the need for public participation and policy mainstreaming; as well as the need to promote intercultural dialogue and establish respect for human rights and difference. The problems with the strategy included the lack of any indication of the scale of activities envisaged or how they might be implemented. There was no detail on which to base any assessment of how the strategic objective "to improve the living conditions and socio-economic status of Roma people" might be achieved. In short, there were no targets, no data, no benchmarks, no costing, no earmarked funding.⁴

As outlined in the report, the wider polarization of political life in Turkey, and the politicization of civic organizations has resulted in critical fissures among Roma. The hostile environment has made it difficult for civil society activists to mobilize on issues that matter most to excluded and deprived communities. This has left many non-partisan activists disenchanted and lamenting the sidelining and demise of rights-based, independent NGOs:

"We wanted to at least work on the mutual issues and we were declared traitors and terrorists, everybody went after each other. Everybody is associated with political parties and runs their activities within the political parties."

The report closes with sets of recommendations on combating discrimination; getting equitable access to basic public services such as housing, education, health and employment; reforming the criminal justice system to ensure non-discriminatory treatment for Roma at the hands of judges, lawyers and law enforcement.

It is clear that progress has been made in terms of recognition. As one observer put it: *"Until 2009, we were called the 'esmer vatandaş' (dark citizens) or other names, now people talk about the Roma question."* It is also clear, that like so many other European countries, this recognition has yet to translate into the kind of redistribution needed to undo histories of deep-rooted and racist exclusion.

To bring tangible transformations to the lives of Roma, a first step would be to devise a national strategy that aligns with the *EU Roma strategic framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation*. In contrast to the 2016 document, such a strategy must include ambitious targets in each of the priority areas, disaggregated data, a robust monitoring mechanism, adequate costing and earmarked funding. In short, the Turkish authorities would need to devise a strategy that matches the ambition of European Commissioner Helena Dalli "to ensure that millions of Roma are treated equally, socially included and able to participate in social and political life without exception."⁵

⁴<http://www.errc.org/news/the-turkish-roma-inclusion-strategy-falls-way-short-of-a-strategy> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵ European Commission, *Press remarks by Commissioner Dalli - EU Roma strategic framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation*. Brussels, 7. říjen 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/speech_20_1855

2. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Roma in Turkey are generally perceived by the non-Roma community as poor and dangerous people who are only good at music and dance. Many non-Roma children have memories of their parents threatening to abandon them with the “Gypsies”. Engraving the scary Gypsy figure in their memories, most of the non-Roma population prefer to engage with Roma only in the sphere of entertainment. The invisibility of the Roma reality in the non-Roma community arises from the privilege of not seeing, not hearing and not knowing the hardship faced by the Roma. However, during the European Union accession process of 2000s, Roma, as well as other minorities, became more visible to the public with their deeply-rooted issues, and the Roma community has turned into an actor in politics.

This research illustrates the general situation of the Roma in Turkey. While examining the reasons of their deeply-rooted issues such as discrimination, poverty and social exclusion; the research also addresses the state policies and their impact on the Roma in Turkey.

This report is written after a desk review of the academic literature, reports about Roma rights and the legal framework, combined with interviews with Roma and non-Roma people in Turkey.

During the research for this report, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve people. Eleven of the interviews were conducted on video calls or telephone calls due to the Covid-19 restrictions, only one of them was conducted face to face. While the interviewees were communicated on online platforms, the research lacks observations from the field. Two Roma MPs, Özcan Purçu and Cemal Bekle, were approached for interviews. Although both of them promised to send their responses by e-mail, and despite subsequent reminders, they have not sent any response. Therefore, their insights concerning the Roma mobilization and representation, could not be included in this research.

The vast majority of the interviewees were people who are involved in the Roma rights movement, either through associations or individual activism. Three female and nine male respondents were interviewed to construct a balanced gender perception. However, as there is no open LGBTI+ individual involved in the Roma rights movement, this study lacks the Roma LGBTI+ perception in Turkey.

Interviewees were chosen based on their locations as well as on their qualifications. They were from seven cities, including İstanbul, İzmir, Ankara, Bandırma, Gaziantep, Edirne, and Sakarya, to represent a wide picture across Turkey.

Although most of the interviewees addressed similar issues and their answers were coherent, some gave contradictory answers, revealing the confusion and conflicting ideas or recommendations about issues. These contradictions are reflected in different chapters.

In this report, discrimination against Roma in Turkey was discussed as a separate chapter and it was included among other cross-cutting themes of gender, children’s rights, and the Covid-19 pandemic in every chapter.

3. DEMOGRAPHICS

Turkish Statistical Institute indicates Turkey's population as 83,614,362 people and breaks down the population into the categories of sex, age, and density.⁶ However, the population statistics are not collected based on ethnicity, religion, or native language, therefore there are no official statistics available about any of the minority groups, including the Roma. There are no scientific or academic studies about the population of minority groups, therefore any estimation about the number of Roma population should be carefully considered. A report by Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, published in 2009, estimated the Roma population in Turkey to be around 2,750,000⁷. However, 12 years after Hammarberg's report, we do not have any reliable statistics about the number of Roma as of today.

The categorical identification of Roma should be addressed while elaborating on the statistics. In many studies, Roma is classified under the umbrella identity of Gypsy, referring to a more categorical classification rather than an ethnic classification. As indicated in Gül Özateşler's study, Gypsies quite often identify 'Gypsiness' with poverty, and therefore call themselves "the poor". Özateşler says that poverty and identity issues very frequently overlap among Gypsies and that not only the widespread poverty but the potential of deep poverty is quite high among the population.⁸

Although the Gypsy category involves many sub-groups and identities, it was decided to use the term 'Rom/Roma' to define the group during the 1971 World Romani Congress to avoid the humiliation coming with the term 'Gypsy'.⁹ Whether to identify as a Gypsy or a Rom is still an ongoing debate, rather than a conversation in the Roma community. The majority of the Roma identify as 'Rom' rather than 'Gypsy', saying that they find it offensive and that it reinforces the stereotyped image of poverty and sexualization. Whereas other activists, such as Mustafa Aksu, identify as 'Gypsy' to deconstruct the derogatory connotation of the word. In his book, Mustafa Aksu not only defended the use of 'Gypsy' but also revealed some of the famous singers' Gypsy origins.¹⁰ Orhan Gencebay, one such famous singer, angrily responded to Mustafa Aksu's claims, saying that he was insulted by being identified as Gypsy and threatened to press charges against him.¹¹

The derogatory use of 'Gypsy' is so common that many proverbs and idioms, such as "a Gypsy girl cannot become a lady, she begs to feed herself"; or "the first Gypsy to become a prince, first hangs (executes) his father", reinforce the image of Roma as poor people without any morals. In January 2021, Erman Toroğlu, a prominent sports commentator, called a football player's behavior "acting like a Gypsy" on national TV. His remarks sparked a wave of great anger in the Roma community, and Roma civil society representatives condemned his remarks, forced him to apologize to the community, and pressed charges against his 'racist comments'.¹²

On the other hand, there is a considerable number of Roma in Turkey who avoid identifying themselves as Roma and hide their origins. Halit Keser, a 57-year-old Rom activist from İzmir, said that many Roma identify

⁶<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=The-Results-of-Address-Based-Population-Registration-System-2020-37210&dil=2> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁷<https://rm.coe.int/16806db8ac> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸G. Özateşler, *Çingene: Türkiye'de Yaftalama ve Dışlayıcı Şiddetin Toplumsal Dinamiği*, Koç Üniversiteleri Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016.

⁹<https://geocities.restorativland.org/~patrin/timeline.htm> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹⁰M. Aksu, *Türkiye'de Çingene Olmak*, Ozan Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2003.

¹¹<https://www.internethaber.com/orhan-gencebaydan-mustafa-aksuya-sert-tepki-cingene-sozune-cok-sinirlendi-foto-galerisi-2052760.htm> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹²<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/romanlar-irkci-ifadeler-kullanan-torogluna-dava-acacak-haber-1509822> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

as Alevi or Abdal (a branch of Alevism) rather than Roma or Gypsy. While Alevism is considered as a local Islamic branch, the Alevi identity offers an intersection between ethnicity, religion, and national identities.¹³ The Alevi population in Turkey is estimated to be up to 20 million¹⁴ and although the majority of them are Turkish, there are Kurdish, Zaza, and Roma Alevi as well, and it is common to see the Alevi Roma identify themselves as Alevi rather than Roma or Gypsy.

Eyüp Demirezen, a 39-year-old Rom activist from Bandırma, referred to the Roma community in Bandırma as “the White Roma”, saying that they reject their Roma origins:

“They call themselves Bulgarian or muhajir (immigrant). If a Rom has lighter skin, they do not say hello to other Roma, even my relatives [with lighter skin] do not say hello to me. We will for sure be assimilated in the next generation.”

The rejection of the Roma identity is a growing concern among Roma rights activists, especially among those Roma who are successfully integrated, educated and employed, and who prefer to hide their identities from their colleagues and other better-off communities. Having overcome poverty, they reject the perceived stigma of being a ‘Gypsy’ by hiding their origins.

According to Eyüp Demirezen, his ‘White Roma’ relatives are not familiar with the Roma culture, they marry non-Roma (Gadje) people, and he is worried that even his daughter might marry a non-Roma and become estranged from their culture.

When asked what the “White Roma” meant, Erdal Yalçın, a 38-year-old Rom from Kuştepe, said that it referred to the Roma who strongly reject both the “Gypsy” identification and their Roma origins.

“They [the White Roma] claim that they have changed, they are not Roma anymore. They do not speak the Romani language and they despise those who speak it,” Erdal Yalçın said.

Some of the interviewees drew attention to the sharpening discrimination within the Roma community, between the “White Roma” and the “Dark Roma”. Erdal Yalçın highlighted the lack of solidarity within the community based on the economic situation. He said that Roma who work at regular jobs and live wealthier lives do not support the poor in the community, even during the harsh conditions of the pandemic:

“They [wealthy Roma] are like captains who saved their boats. They do not help the other Roma. There is no solidarity culture. Once, a Roma person, whose salary is 9.000 TL (900 €), asked me how to access aid.”

There are three main branches of Romani origins: Rom, Dom, and Lom. While Roma mostly live in the Western part, Lom live in the Black Sea region and Dom live in the Eastern and South-Eastern Anatolia regions. As mentioned above, the Abdal people identify as another group who follow the Alevi sect of Islam, and they mainly live in the Central Anatolia region. Alevi and Abdal Roma will not be included in this research as they do not identify as Roma and rather are mobilized around their religion and belief system than their ethnicities. Additionally, Lom people will not be included in this research as the community is strongly isolated, and it is very difficult to retrieve any reliable information about them.

Roma in Turkey are very committed to the national ideology of owning Turkishness and undermining or not recognizing other identities, especially the Kurdish identity, except for the Dom people. The puzzling phenomenon of Turkishness perceive all Muslims as Turks, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic origins. As

¹³ https://books.google.com.tr/books?hl=tr&lr=&id=VMm4DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=alevism&ots=CE9qynR0Sg&sig=kVhu7Pa421SfHUK1OYQwscThKks&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=alevism&f=false (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹⁴ https://books.google.com.tr/books?hl=tr&lr=&id=VMm4DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=alevism&ots=CE9qynR0Sg&sig=kVhu7Pa421SfHUK1OYQwscThKks&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=alevism&f=false (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

a result, only Turks are considered full members of the nation and loyal citizens, and as long as they undermine their ethnic and linguistic origins, they benefit from all rights. However, Dom people living with Kurds in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey are more integrated into the Kurdish culture, and most of them identify themselves as Kurds. Being regarded as a Kurd instead of a Turk leads the Dom people to be stigmatized as imperfect citizens.

For those who openly identify as Roma, Turkishness is perceived as an umbrella identity to prove their belonging to the public, and to fully access their rights as citizens. However, the widespread nationalist tension fuels discrimination even towards Roma who publicly and strongly identify as Turkish. Eyüp Demirezen said that despite the fact that the Roma embrace their Turkishness, there is a widespread feeling among the Roma that Turks discriminate against them:

“Turks do not consider Roma as Turks; we are well aware of that. Their behavior reveals it, we feel it. As much as we say that we are Turks, they imply that we are not that much of Turks.”

4. DISCRIMINATION

4.1. Legal Framework

Turkey's minority regime is based on the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty¹⁵ and there is no mention of 'minority' in the Constitution or other national legislation. The Treaty identifies only non-Muslim communities as minorities, and provides them the right to establish religious, educational, and social institutions, as well as protecting their freedom of religion, and their rights of legal and political equality. In the minority context of the Treaty, only Greeks, Armenians, Christians, and Jews are formally acknowledged as minorities. Other ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities such as Kurds, Alevi, Caucasians, Laz, and Roma are not formally recognized as minorities and therefore not provided collective minority rights.

Anti-discrimination laws in Turkey are regulated through articles in the Constitution, Criminal Code, Labor Law, and other various legal documents. However, there is no specific law or code to regulate anti-discrimination with an integral approach. According to Article 10 of the Constitution¹⁶, everyone is equal before the law without distinction as to language, race, color, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion, and sect, or any such grounds. By stating "any such grounds", the article allows the courts to interpret discrimination broadly, including other potential grounds. The following paragraph of Article 10 ensures equality between men and women, while the last paragraph of the article obliges all the state institutes to act by the equality principle. The last paragraph especially focuses on protecting the rights of the disadvantaged people and minorities when they are in correspondence with the state institutions. In addition, Article 70 of the Constitution ensures that every Turkish citizen has the right to enter public service without any discrimination.

Article 122¹⁷ of the Criminal Code, titled 'Hatred and Discrimination', prevents various activities based on discrimination of language, race, nationality, color, gender, disability, political view, philosophical belief, religion, or sect and defines it as a crime. While the article penalizes discrimination concerning employment, social services, social aid, education, access to services and food, it does not refer to discrimination related to the right to housing.

Article 5 of the Labor Law forbids discrimination based on language, race, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion, and sex or similar reasons during an employment relationship. The referral of "similar reasons" allows the courts to interpret the article broadly. The article also ensures the same payment for the same job and gender equality.

The Human Rights and Equality Institution (TIHEK), Turkey's first equality institution to combat discrimination, was established in 2016 through the TIHEK Law No. 6701. The Law includes the conceptual definition of discrimination. While the definition of discrimination in other laws is vague or open-ended, the definition in the TIHEK Law is certain and limited and does not leave space for interpretation. Although it is a significant development to have a national equality institution established, the Public Ombudsman Institution¹⁸ has been observed as "much more advanced than TIHEK in terms of institutionalization, knowhow, and specialization" and the TIHEK was found not as much effective as a national human rights mechanism is expected to be.¹⁹

¹⁵https://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹⁶https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹⁷https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/6453/file/Turkey_CC_2004_am2016_en.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

¹⁸The Public Ombudsman Institution was established in 2012 to examine, investigate, and submit recommendations concerning all sorts of acts and actions as well as attitudes and behaviors of the administration within the framework of an understanding of human rights-based justice and legality and conformity with principles of fairness, through creating an independent and effective mechanism of complaint concerning the public services.

¹⁹<https://www.esithaklar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ESHID-TIHEK-RAPORU-ENG.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

In comparison to the Directive 2000/43²⁰ and Directive 2000/78²¹, the main European anti-discrimination legislation, Turkey's legislation on minority and anti-discrimination is limited, vague, and does not constitute an integral approach to the issue. The legislation does not provide satisfying preventing measures for disadvantaged groups of ethnicity, race, age, religion, or gender orientation; therefore, the Roma are not protected under the national anti-discrimination legislation. As advised by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the authorities "should include the grounds of citizenship, sexual orientation and gender identity in the list of grounds of prohibited discrimination and insert rules on the compensation of victims and the burden of proof in court cases".²²

4.2. Daily Life Discrimination

As one of the largest minority groups in Turkey, Roma are considered one of the most disadvantaged and having difficulty accessing their fundamental civil rights.²³ Due to the most severe form of poverty and social exclusion, Roma are forced to live in advanced marginality. They constitute the most disadvantaged groups in both social and economic terms. Society's perception of Roma, replicated through media and other means, pictures them as poor criminals without any morals and manifests itself in dangerous stereotypes and discrimination. While talking about the discrimination, many of the interviewees mentioned that their dark color, accent, clothes, and addresses are the primary elements of being stereotyped by the others. In return, Romani communities are forced to maintain an invisible life and cannot integrate into other communities. As a result of the segregation, Roma label the non-Roma as "Gadje" and refuse to be assimilated. This, in turn, reinforces a mistrust of the Gadje within the community, a mistrust borne of centuries of persecution.

The Roma in Turkey were "largely invisible due to their weak ties with the state, an absence of civil organizations that represent them, and their non-appearance in political institutions" until the 2000s²⁴. With the mobilization of Roma civil society in the 2000s, Roma issues have become more visible to the public. In 2010, the government launched the Roma Democratic Opening Process to take necessary steps in the Roma question. Even though Roma issues have become more visible and the awareness about the Roma question has risen, the Roma continue to face discrimination in their daily lives.

The social segregation between Roma and non-Roma manifests itself in marriages, as most of the Roma marriages are within the community. For the Roma, inter-racial marriages are still taboo. While most of the Roma are opposing to inter-racial marriages, Gül Özateşler says that some Roma consider them as a success.²⁵ Inter-racial marriages are highly discouraged by both Roma and non-Roma, especially by the families of those to be married. Erdal Yalçın said that when a Rom man marries a Gadji woman, their families do not talk to each other. According to him, Gadje families react stronger to inter-racial marriages, and many families reject their sons or daughters for marrying a Romani person.

Eyüp Demirezen said that discrimination towards Roma is very deeply rooted, so much that he had to break up with his girlfriend because when she found out that he is Roma, she started to stereotype him:

"My ex-girlfriend said that a Rom wanted to marry her and her family did not approve. She said she would not marry a Rom man. I said I was of Romani origin, she did not believe me at first. She asked me whether

²⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2000:180:0022:0026:EN:PDF> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2000:303:0016:0022:EN:PDF> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²² <https://rm.coe.int/interim-follow-up-conclusions-on-turkey-5th-monitoring-cycle-/168094ce03> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²³ <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Roma-in-Turkey-for-OSCE-26-Sep-2.pdf> (Retrieved 14, 2021).

²⁴ <https://ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²⁵ Özateşler, op. cit., p. 110.

we have burnt Ibrahim the prophet. This is the mindset. I didn't go into discussion, I laughed it off and said – yes, we burnt him.”

Erdal Yalçın volunteered in schools in human book projects which allow the students to ask people questions about their identity and culture. When a person stands out as a “human book”, s/he represents an identity or a character based on ethnicity, race or gender. When Erdal Yalçın represented the Roma as a human book, he was shocked by the stereotyping directed towards him by children:

“The students asked whether we believe in God and religion, or which God and religion we believed in, who we worshipped. They even asked questions like whether we washed the dead people before burial, whether we take showers or how many times we take a shower in a year.”

Halit Keser said that people contact him and ask him to organize funerals with the municipalities since he is perceived as a community leader. However, whenever Halit Keser contacts the municipalities, the personnel responds ignorant or act arbitrarily. Halit Keser strongly believes that the personnel are discriminating against the Roma and they “feel discrimination to their bones” in every situation.

“Whenever there is a funeral, people ask me to contact the municipality to organize the funeral. But the municipalities are ignorant, they say there is no [funeral] vehicle or say that they need to receive an order from their seniors to send a [funeral] vehicle. It's not your father's vehicle, it belongs to the public. If people need the vehicles, you have to send them.”

Kemal Vural Tarlan, a 46-year-old Roma rights activist from Gaziantep, said that Syrian Dom people are having great difficulty in registering into the system, and their attempts are often thwarted by discriminative acts:

“A Syrian Dom baby was born 20 days ago. The baby should have been given an ID card. The family insisted that we should assist them while registering the baby since they do not even let the family in the building because of their clothes and dark skin. Although the family speaks Turkish, they insisted on assigning an Arabic translator and forced them to speak Arabic. The family says they are not treated like humans.”

5. ACCESS TO HOUSING

The Roma in Turkey generally live in substandard housing with poor infrastructure. They live in deedless shacks, barracks, shelters, or tents in crowded neighborhoods without any legal guarantee of tenancy or ownership of their houses. In most cases, the Roma have little or no access to electricity, sewage system, and transportation. Although the social exclusion caused by the segregated neighborhoods can be considered as their survival strategy, it does not necessarily offer the Roma a safe space²⁶. As most of the interviewees highlighted, living in a Roma neighborhood itself can be the reason for stigmatization and discrimination, especially during the employment process. This stigmatization manifests itself in the “spatial character” of Roma, as Roma neighborhoods are “marginalized ghettos where the most excluded reside.”²⁷

While nomadic life is a very significant feature among Romani communities, most of the Roma in Turkey are settled. However, due to the harsh conditions of the neighborhoods they are settled in and the spreading urban transformation and gentrification plans in Roma settlements, large numbers of Roma are forced to migrate and resettle in new locations.

The conditions of housing differ in every region and neighborhood, depending on the main income source of the region and neighborhood, and the education level of the population. Elmas Köçkün, a 27-year-old Romani activist who lives in İzmir, said that very few Roma live in luxury houses in İzmir, but the rest of them live in dire conditions, including residing in tents and barracks.

Yücel Tural, 46-year-old Romani activist from Ankara, said that although some Roma live in better buildings and apartments, the majority still live in poor conditions. According to Yücel Tural, the majority of Roma families, comprising eight to 10 members, live in one-room dwellings, with leaking roofs, and outside toilets, and their power and water supplies have been cut off. Even those who live in apartments with better conditions are facing similar difficulties:

“For instance, families are living in apartments built by the Housing Development Administration and the apartments are very small since the families are crowded. They cannot afford the monthly payments for the apartments, so the houses were taken from them and then given to other Roma families which created conflict between Roma families.”

Yücel Tural had the chance to observe Roma families living in apartments during his field research in Samsun. He said that their poor living conditions continue although they live in better-built apartments:

“The ones who were living in the first and second floors were dealing with leaked sewage. On the third floor, we saw a horse. I could not believe it. The owner had left his horse cart at the entrance but he had taken his horse up to his apartment on the third floor because he was worried that someone would steal the horse.”

Some of the Roma live in mixed neighborhoods, usually with other disadvantaged and poor communities. Erdal Yalçın, who lives in Kuştepe, said that although the neighborhood is known as a Roma neighborhood, it is a mixed neighborhood and only 6000-7000 of the total 20,000 residents are Roma. However, Erdal Yalçın added, the Roma dominates the neighborhood with their lifestyle and culture.

²⁶<https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Roma-in-Turkey-for-OSCE-26-Sep-2.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²⁷<https://ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

“We live with other communities, with Gadje. It is difficult for a Gadje to live with Roma, for someone going to work at 8:00 am, it is difficult to fall asleep while the Roma are playing loud music for wedding parties until midnight. But they got used to us and we got used to them.”

Erdal Yalçın said that the cheap economy of the Kuştepe neighborhood attracts not only Roma but also other disadvantaged and poor communities. However, Erdal Yalçın said, the insufficient infrastructure of the neighborhood may endanger their lives in case of natural disasters:

“Gadje usually come [to Kuştepe] for cheaper rents and the easy transportation. But Roma prefer [Kuştepe] for cheaper rents and also to be with the community. If an earthquake hits, 60-70 percent of Kuştepe buildings will collapse. Maybe even my building will collapse. But it’s obvious how much money we can make, we live day by day, so we have to put up with it. You cannot find tomato paste for 2 TL (0.2 €), cheese for 5 TL (0.5 €) or buy oil in small cups in other neighborhoods.”

5.1. Gentrification and the Demolition of Sulukule: Destruction of Roma Culture

Roma neighborhoods in Turkey are usually located in the suburbs of the city or the least developed parts of the city. As the city develops and extends, many old Roma neighborhoods become a part of the city center, their land becomes more valuable and therefore face the risk of gentrification. Nurcan Purçu, a 23-year-old Rom activist from İzmir, said that her extended family in Uşak works in basketry, and they collect reeds from the nearby rivers and dump them in the neighborhood. The owners of the new seven to 10-storey apartments rising up around the neighborhood, see dumped reeds as dirty and unaesthetic, and Nurcan Purçu is worried that the families will be forced out by gentrification plans.

During the last 10 years, especially with the forced gentrification and evacuation of Sulukule, a historic Roma neighborhood that dated back to at least 1000 years, many Roma neighborhoods have been demolished by the authorities. Although the activists, artists, musicians, journalists, architects, and the locals of Sulukule formed a platform to stop the gentrification plan, filed a lawsuit to stop the process and the UNESCO warned the authorities of İstanbul to lose its world heritage status, the gentrification plan went into effect. Many of the Roma population of Sulukule were promised houses built by Housing Development Administration in Taşoluk, a district that is 30 miles from the city center, with small monthly payments. However, being located far away from the city center and therefore their traditional street jobs, the Roma in Taşoluk could not afford to pay their bills or the monthly-house payments, ended up selling their houses for cheap prices, and moving back to the neighborhoods around Sulukule. Very few of them were able to get apartments in Sulukule and continued to live in the neighborhood.

Hacer Foggo, one of the interviewees, is a well-known Roma rights activist in based in İstanbul. Foggo initially covered Roma rights issues as a professional journalist and from the time she found out about the urban transformation plan of Sulukule, she began to spend more time in the area covering the violations caused by the gentrification. She quickly evolved into a full-time activist, mobilized Roma and non-Roma people, and formed the Sulukule Platform to save the area:

“We launched hundreds of press conferences, conducted protests, organized workshops with musicians to promote the Sulukule culture. Our activities were covered by the international media. UNESCO approached us, Sezen Aksu (a famous pop singer) and Tony Gatlif (a famous Roma movie director) visited the area. We went to the European Parliament in Brussels to explain the situation, we visited the Human Rights Commission at the Turkish Parliament and addressed our demands.”

The Platform was able to apply to the Council of Monuments and establish some buildings of the neighborhood as historical structures and saved them from being demolished. The Platform’s efforts to stop the destruction through legal ways were revoked, although the court decided that the process of demolition

should be stopped before the final decision²⁸, the gentrification process carried. Today, most of the neighborhood has been replaced by luxury villas although the legal process about the transformation has not been finalized.

“An old woman’s legal case is still in process. Because her house was demolished and her situation became more precarious, we had to move her to a state-funded elderly home,” Hacer Foggo said.

On the other hand, Hacer Foggo said, the Sulukule Platform’s efforts made the situation of the Roma in Turkey more visible:

“Sulukule had a huge impact on making the Roma more visible by mentioning the Sulukule gentrification in the EU progress reports every year. The Roma Opening²⁹ started during these years.”

In parallel to Sulukule, Hacer Foggo said that the gentrification process in Turkey initially has started in Roma neighborhoods since they were perceived as the weakest links.

Sulukule, as the most memorable gentrification example, struck many as the destruction of Roma culture. The failure of a successful resistance mobilized to stop the gentrification left a mark in the Roma community. All the interviewees have referred to Sulukule while talking about the gentrification plans in Roma neighborhoods and expressed their hopelessness.

“There are many examples [of gentrification] in various parts of Turkey. If they want the [Roma] people to benefit, they should develop models following the requests, with their lifestyle. It usually aims to destroy the culture and displace people. There are gentrification plans for İzmir’s Roma neighborhoods and we do not know what to expect. I believe there will be violations of rights, as we have seen before,” Elmas Köçkün said.

Witnessing the gentrification and its toll on the Roma residents in Sarıgöl, a well-known Roma neighborhood in İstanbul, Erdal Yalçın said that even standard procedures are undermined while implementing gentrification plans in Roma neighborhoods:

“When we went to Sarıgöl, an old woman approached us, saying that she went to her neighbor and when she came back, her house was demolished, with all her furniture inside. We asked the municipality officials how they could do this, they said that they have officially notified the woman of the demolishing process. But she is illiterate and had no clue about the notification. Many families have become victims [of the gentrification], their deed appropriation documents have been ignored by the authorities. You cannot do that in a Gadge neighborhood, you cannot demolish a furnished house or a house with a deed appropriation, but they can do it easily in a Roma neighborhood.”

Eyüp Demirezen said that similar violations took place in Bandırma during the gentrification of Roma neighborhoods:

“They sent the people to the houses built by Housing Development Administration, but people could not afford the rents, the monthly payments. Sixty percent of them were Roma and the rest were from other communities, including Kurds. The communities could not integrate, there were fights between [ethnic and racial] groups which have resulted in deaths. Only 10 to 15 families came back to the neighborhood, moved into the houses which are to be demolished, the house owners cannot kick them out. The families are living in harsh conditions and they try to survive by collecting papers and scrap for recycling.”

²⁸<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/court-rules-against-new-sulukule-villas-23085> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

²⁹For further information about the Roma Opening, please check out Chapter 6.1.

Olgun Çaylı, a 27-year-old Rom activist from Edirne, said that they usually observe a rise in the drug trade and drug abuse in neighborhoods to be gentrified and it increases the police pressure in the area. He claimed that in those neighborhoods, with less security and more poverty arising from the drug issues, the residents are more easily convinced to move out and sell their properties to the authorities for “almost no money”. Olgun Çaylı also said that residents cannot have proper communication with the authorities about the payments, applications, or objections during the gentrification process:

“The state comes [to the neighborhood], gentrifies, and then leaves.”

Eren Çekiç, a 25-year-old Rom activist from İstanbul, also said that authorities choose not to combat crime in Roma neighborhoods, as it provides an excuse and rationale for future gentrification plans:

“The officials do not interfere in the drug trade and addiction; they do not make social projects to inform people about the harms of drug abuse. They do not run rehabilitation programs. We have these programs in the action plan but we don’t see the plan implemented. They say this is a bad, criminal area and that it should be destroyed and changed. That’s what they say to rich people when selling the land after gentrification.”

Orhan Tanyel, 46-year-old Rom activist from Sakarya, said that the gentrification process in Sapanca district was unfair and only some of the Roma could receive payment for their houses:

“We founded a communication office for the deed owners to check out the prices of their lands and houses. The prices were so low, people became very angry, we gathered and marched, we protested outside the Sapanca Municipality, we approached the Ministry of Family and Social Services and voiced our concerns. Then we took it to the court, the prices went up a little higher. Some could receive the payment and moved to new apartments.”

Orhan Tanyel said that he is expecting his neighborhood to be gentrified soon and the gentrification will disperse the residents:

“Currently the gentrification plan for my neighborhood is on hold, they cannot create a solution. But they will implement it in a couple of years, hundred percent. Extended families of 20, 30, 40 households will head towards the areas they like, but they will not go far away from the center. They will be dispersed and separated, for sure.”

Referring to the way of living in Roma neighborhoods, Orhan Tanyel said that people are used to not locking their doors, sitting outside their houses, going to neighbors without asking whether they are available or not, and socializing with all the residents while passing through the neighborhood. However, due to gentrification and forced migration, Orhan Tanyel said that people are trying to get used to living with strangers, locking their doors, and not socializing like before. According to Orhan Tanyel, these changes take a heavy psychological toll on the residents.

Roma who work as seasonal agricultural laborers continue to live a nomadic or semi-nomadic life, and their migration routes centered around available agricultural work and selling cheap commodities. These groups usually live in tents, which are easy to set up and pack.

Roma in Turkey consist of different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. So much that, every Roma neighborhood holds a different culture, and the Roma families moving to established Roma neighborhoods experience difficulties integrating into the community. Olgun Çaylı said that it takes time for the families to integrate into the new neighborhood:

“A family from Sulukule moved to our neighborhood. Their daughter and son could not adapt and left the school. The mother did not leave the house for months because she did not know the people and she could not trust them.”

5.2. Lynching and Forced Displacements

Forced displacements and evacuations, as well as the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, take the highest toll on Roma children. In some cases, families who are forced out of their neighborhoods continue to move from one place to another, until they find the most suitable place to settle. Their children move along with them, and once they settle in, the children face difficulties integrating into new schools and getting along with new teachers and friends. While on the move, they miss their classes at school and it becomes more difficult to get back on track. Seasonal workers also bring their children with them to the places they go, which makes it impossible for the children to continue with their studies. In many cases, children fail at school, lose their interest in studying, and therefore quit school.

Elmas Köçkün's case, the semi-nomadic life of her extended family impacts the school attendance of the children. The children of her relatives in Usak, who live a semi-nomadic life to sell their goods and commodities in various places, cannot go to school regularly:

“Even if it is wintertime and the weather is cold, they do not let their children stay at home alone. They go everywhere all together, with their children. So, the children cannot keep up with their studies, cannot build friendships, and face orientation issues at school.”

The lynching attempts in Selendi and İznik were the most violent incidents towards Roma in recent history. In the Selendi district of Manisa, where the Roma have been living for 35 years, a Romani person was beaten at a local coffee shop on 31 December 2009 by the coffee shop owner and his relatives. As the violence escalated related to this incident, on 5 January 2010, the non-Roma residents of Selendi attacked the Roma residents at their houses and tents, burned their houses, and damaged their vehicles and carts.³⁰ Due to the violent attacks, all 75 Roma living in the neighborhood were forced out of the district. and According to the report by the Roma Rights Association 1000 people were involved in the attacks.³¹ The report indicates that following the forced migration from Selendi, the Roma residents were separated and moved to other districts of Manisa, where life has become more precarious and none have been able to enjoy the peace and relative prosperity they had in Selendi.³² The report also says that due to the trauma of the lynching and the lack of psychological support, women and children were afraid to leave their houses, became more vulnerable and the children ended up quitting studies.³³

Yücel Tatal, who is the director of Roma Rights Association and the writer of the Selendi report, said that he was very disturbed and disappointed with the attitude of the authorities towards the victims:

“When they take the Roma victims to another place, they give them used plates and cups. The Roma ask them why they are giving them the used stuff, their answer would be if the Roma are using anything better at their houses. It reveals the perception of the authorities.”

Yücel Tatal said that the victims of Selendi were continuously moved from one place to another, and not welcomed in any of them. He said that they were treated like “they had plague”. Suffering from the trauma of

³⁰<https://www.ihd.org.tr/blon-el-rapor167/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

³¹<https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/168964-selendi-raporu-linc-ve-surgun-edilen-romanlar-huzur-bulamadi> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

³²T. Özbek, *Manisa Selendi İlçesindeki Linç Girişimi Sonrasında Başka İlçelere Sürülen Romanların Ekonomik ve Psikolojik Durum Tespiti Araştırma Raporu*, Roman Hakları Derneği, Ankara, 2015.

³³Ibid.

lynching and constant moving, Yücel Tural said that children were unable to integrate into the society or the school:

"I ran into a girl, she could not stay in crowds, she was terrified of any noise. She was trying to survive. Why didn't the state help these people? What was their sin? Their only sin was being Roma. Is it a crime to be a Rom?"

The court sentenced 38 defendants to between 8 months and 45 years in prison for damaging properties and provocation of hatred and hostility in society or humiliation during the Selendi attacks; and acquitted 42 others.³⁴ Yücel Tural said that there have been obstacles during the initial trials and they ran a media campaign to draw attention to the legal process:

"The trials were not moving forward between 2010 and 2012. We started to share the details with the media, made it more visible to the public. In 2013, the process moved forward, the media started to observe the trials. The defendants were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment, varying between 8 months to 45 years. Our association's demand to become a party to the case was accepted. We were able to submit our reports and research to the case file. The legal process has not been finalized yet. We were not pleased with the convictions, but still, it was an important milestone in Turkey's history."

In İznik district of Bursa, a similar lynching incident took place on 7 September 2013. During an argument, a non-Roma person was killed and a Romani father and son were arrested as suspects. This incident sparked hatred in the neighborhood towards the Roma residents and turned into a lynching campaign that lasted two days. The non-Roma residents attacked the houses, shops, vehicles, and carts of Roma.³⁵ However, unlike the verdict in the Selendi case, the 31 defendants of the İznik lynch attempt received light suspended sentences of between one and five months. As a result, none of the attackers went to prison. Yücel Tural's Roma Rights Association was involved in the case as a third party and they were very unhappy with the verdicts as it leads to impunity for violence against Roma.

According to Yücel Tural, lynchings in Selendi and İznik revealed the reality of the Roma question in Turkey.

"The lynching cases look like it was kicked off by an issue between two people but it shows the history of the tension. There have been claims that during the lynching, the municipality was making announcements for people to gather, and the municipal vehicles were used to gather attackers. When the Roma were attacked by stones and sticks, they were fearing for their lives and no police officers came to help. The attacks lasted for hours. In the end, the gendarmerie arrived and took the Roma to the station. The Roma thought the Gendarmerie were Roma because they do not believe that a non-Roma would help them."

Eren Çekiç said that families forced to leave the Sarıgöl neighborhood due to gentrification moved to their neighborhood in Edirne were not welcomed by the residents and therefore could not integrate:

"They have been living here for 6-7 years. But the grocery shop owner does not put their shopping on credit while I can put my shopping on credit because I was born here. The shop owner does not trust them because they moved in from Sarıgöl neighborhood, they are not locals. They apply for jobs but the business owners do not trust them. They prefer to hire the people they know."

Kemal Vural Tarlan specifically works with the Dom communities. According to Kemal Vural Tarlan, Dom people mainly live in Eastern Turkey which is mostly populated by Kurds and due to the conflict in the

³⁴<https://www.diken.com.tr/233861-2/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

³⁵<https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/168585-iznik-te-romanlara-linc-girisiminde-herkese-beraat> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

region³⁶, the Dom have to migrate constantly within the area, mainly following the displaced Kurds. In some cases, the Dom followed the Kurds settling to the Western cities and integrated into city life. Kemal Vural Tarlan said that currently, many Dom people are seasonal workers and therefore lead a mobile life.

Saying that it is uncommon for Dom people to have private property and that they have a weak relationship with properties, Kemal Vural Tarlan claimed that during urban transformation plans, it is even easier for the authorities to push the Dom residents to the suburbs and the slums of the city:

“They can sell their houses to contractors for a very cheap price, they get scared of the authorities and leave their properties easily. They are constantly being pushed towards the margins of the city.”

³⁶The prolonged Kurdish conflict in Turkey has persisted between the Turkish government and the PKK (The Kurdish Worker's Party) in the form of guerrilla movements and limited warfare since 1984, mainly taking place in Southeast Turkey. At least 20,000 people have died, over 3,000 villages were evacuated or burned, leaving millions of people displaced and millions of children without access to school.

6. ACCESS TO EDUCATION

For Roma children, access to education has always been a systematic issue. As in many countries with a significant Roma population, schools in Turkey are usually formed as ‘Roma schools’ where most of the students are Roma, or schools form classes comprised of only Roma students. The most fundamental issues about the education of Roma children are determined as not enrolling in schools, low attendance rates, poor school performance, and early dropouts.³⁷ Due to the spatial segregation of Roma and the deep poverty, most of the Roma children do not have equal access to education. Those who can access the education, usually drop out early due to lack of support for school expenses and discrimination at schools.

While some respondents said that it’s mostly up to the family to encourage children to go to school and study, others say it is mostly up to the school. According to Halit Keser, families play a crucial role in children’s school life:

“I have seen teachers who were paying special attention to Roma students. But they give up after a while, they stop pushing the students. In marginal districts, families warn the teachers not to intervene. In that case, teachers cannot do much.”

Whereas in Elmas Köçkün’s case, she could succeed in school with the encouragement of both the family and the school:

“In our culture, education comes after feeding yourself and housing. If the family is socio-economically on good terms, then they can fulfill the requirements for education. But [the Roma children] usually fall behind the class, even if they continue to study, they still have orientation issues, especially in mixed schools where non-Roma are the majority. They face discrimination and stereotyping due to their looks, outfits, and accents.”

Elmas Köçkün said her family played a big role in her school performance because they enrolled her in a school with better conditions. But her grandfather had to bribe the school authorities to register her to that school:

“My grandfather did not send me to the school where mostly the Roma and Kurdish students studied. The students at my school were predominantly Turkish, there were very few Kurdish and Roma students. My friends who were enrolled in the other school could not succeed, most of them dropped out. The conditions were harsh in their school, it lacked hygiene, the teachers were tough and rude. The classes were crowded, 3 students had to squeeze in a desk. I would not have wanted to study at that school.”

Similar to Elmas Köçkün, Eyüp Demirezen said that families try to register their children to private schools or schools outside the neighborhood, because the “Roma schools” are considered as “exile” by teachers, as the authorities appoint teachers with low scores to these schools. Erdal Yalçın agreed with Eyüp Demirezen, saying that *the Gadje* find ways to enroll their students in other schools rather than “Roma schools”, and only Roma families with economic freedom can encourage their children to study, and some families even enroll their children in private schools.

³⁷ <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Roma-in-Turkey-for-OSCE-26-Sep-2.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

6.1. Discrimination in Schools

Although Elmas Köçkün faced discrimination and stereotyping from her peers in the mixed school, she could overcome the humiliation with the help of her teacher:

"I was very much into studying. Going to school was a way to getting out of the neighborhood, communicating with other communities, discovering a different way of life. But children can be very mean. I was discriminated against by other students. They would say -the Gypsy is here- because my skin was darker. But my teacher paid a lot of attention to me, she did not stereotype me and made me feel any different. She knew I was successful in Turkish and social studies, so she supported me by saying that I did well, by giving me homework in these fields of study."

Confronting the discrimination of her Roma origins, Elmas Köçkün first rejected her Roma identity. She did not want her mother to come to school wearing *şalvar* (baggy trousers), asked her to wear something else instead.

"I was stereotyped as a Gypsy because my mother was in şalvar. You either deny it or accept it. I made peace with my culture and started to advocate [Roma rights] during my high school and university years."

Studying at a mixed school, Nurcan Purçu mostly suffered from discrimination from her peers and teachers:

"Most of the students were Gadge, I was an outcast, they would not hold my hand because of my dark skin. Our teacher was not capable of setting equality, I was always forced to sit with the lazy students even though I was a hard-working student and received a certificate of excellence. I could never cross to the other side of the class, I was always sitting at the desk of lazy students. I think it was because of my teacher's attitude."

Nurcan Purçu also referred to the ongoing discrimination at schools, saying that her cousin's daughter almost quit studying because of discrimination:

"My cousin's daughter was discriminated in the school because she was a Rom. She was pressured [by her peers], her teacher told her that she is not capable of studying. She did not want to go to school although she was a successful student. So, my cousin intervened. If my cousin's daughter did not inform us about the issue, my cousin would not have intervened, her daughter probably would have quit school and get married when she turned 17."

Elmas Köçkün, like many other Roma students, lacked a role model and support from her family. She had no one to reach out to get help for her homework, and therefore, she was on her own when she needed help and support:

"There was no support from the neighborhood or from around. Livelihood came first, therefore, education was the priority of well-off families. Sometimes I had difficulties in finishing my homework. My teacher would get angry from time to time, but not always. If she was angry all the time, I would not have continued with my studies."

Erdal Yalçın, similar to Elmas Köçkün, highlighted the importance of teachers' attitudes and the impact on Roma students:

"I heard a teacher telling a student not to come to classes, she said she will let him pass the classes if he doesn't come to school. Because of this attitude, children cannot learn to read and write even though they pass classes. They are illiterate. As a result, they become bitter."

Nurcan Çaylı addressed the lack of role models for Roma children, emphasizing the importance of positive examples of educated Roma that the children can look up to, learn from, and be inspired by. Referring to her own school years, Nurcan Purçu said that she could not get any help for her studies from the people around her:

“I could not ask my mother or father to help with my homework, because they only graduated from elementary school. There was nobody to ask for something or get support. I needed social support and it was difficult.”

Eren Çekiç said that Roma children in Edirne mostly study at Roma schools and it creates an immense gap between Roma and non-Roma students:

“Non-Roma students attend study groups while Roma students attend social activity groups. When they take the exams, Roma children get low scores. We have applied to the schools, asked them why they are discriminating against the Roma students and not sending them to study groups. They answered that students do not demand it. If you do not explain to the students what it is for, they do not demand it. Also, teachers prefer social activities over study groups as they find it easier.”

According to Yücel Tural, the level of education is declining among the Roma, compared to 10 years ago:

“The situation is terrible. Ten years ago, we were complaining about drop-outs from high school. Now, they are hardly going to elementary school. The physical conditions of schools are insufficient. They do not have art, music, or gym teachers. If they had teachers putting effort into these areas, they could discover talents. School directors, teachers, even cleaning personnel are discriminating and humiliating the Roma students. On the other hand, Roma families force children to work instead of spending money and sending them to school. The education chapter of the Roma Strategy Plan should be taken into consideration seriously and implemented.”

Eyüp Demirezen said that Roma children who cannot learn to read and write at school, learn some letters of the alphabet and some words by using social media:

“Thank God there is the internet, so the children are forced to learn to read and write. They recognize some words and letters. They learn the names of websites. They also use the voice search on Google and YouTube.”

6.2. Early Marriages

Studies³⁸ indicate that early marriages are very common in Roma communities. Early marriages are considered as part of the traditional codes and in most cases, perceived as the family’s survival strategy since a married child is one less person in the family to feed. Usually, children at secondary or high school, between 15 and 16 years of age conduct early marriages.³⁹ According to a study⁴⁰, the early marriage rate within the Kocaeli Roma community is 34.3% and nearly half of the Roma girls marry before the age of 18. In many cases, early marriages are the destiny of the children who drop out of school. But in some cases, early marriages can lead the students to quit studying and start working. While early marriages are perceived as

³⁸See <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Roma-in-Turkey-for-OSCE-26-Sep-2.pdf> s:3 and <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1657770> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

³⁹<https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Roma-in-Turkey-for-OSCE-26-Sep-2.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁰<https://jasstudies.com/DergiTamDetay.aspx?ID=4875> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

the main cause of issues faced by Roma, it is also argued that early marriages can deepen the already existing issues and creates a vicious circle for the Roma⁴¹.

The legal marriage age in Turkey is 18. However, if the child has an “exceptional” situation at the age of 16, s/he can only marry with a court decision approving it. If the child is 17 and the parents are permitting the decision to get married, then s/he can get married.⁴² However, in most cases, early marriages are forced by the family or the community and can prevent the children from accessing their lives or even endanger their health. According to the latest statistics by the Turkish Statistical Institute, in 2009, early marriages were constituting 8.1 percent of all marriages and the rate decreased to 3.1 in 2019.⁴³ However, the official statistics are only covering early marriages at the age of 16 and 17, not including the marriages under these ages.

According to Orhan Tanyel, early marriages are still an issue among the Roma community but the age of getting married is increasing:

“The marriage age used to be as early as 14 or 15 years-old, but it’s climbing up to the age of 16 to 18. It depends on the neighborhood. Early marriages are less common in mixed neighborhoods. Almost nobody under 18 gets married in mixed neighborhoods.”

6.3. SIROMA Project: A Success or a Failure?

On 9 November 2015, the project titled “Promoting Social Inclusion at Densely Roma Populated Areas” (SIROMA) was launched as a requirement under the “Roma Opening” chapter of the European Union candidacy process. The project was run with the collaboration of the EU and the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Family and Social Services.⁴⁴ The SIROMA project aimed to facilitate the integration of Roma and disadvantaged individuals into society by increasing the capacity of social protection institutions. During the project, which lasted for 24 months, 44 schools were chosen as the pilot schools⁴⁵ in 12 cities to implement the targets of the project. Although the project was welcomed by the Roma with excitement, interviewees were disappointed with the implementation of the project and complained about the lack of evaluation and assessment. Roma associations were critical of the insufficient implementation of the Roma Opening Strategy Action Plan as they were still struggling with inequalities in housing, health and education.⁴⁶ On the other hand, while a research about SIROMA indicates that “many Roma associations engaged in clientelist relations” and therefore did not gain the trust of the majority of the Roma community, other associations that demonstrated support to the community “enjoy public trust”.⁴⁷

Olgun Çaylı sent his child to a pilot SIROMA school and he was dissatisfied with the teachers’ ignorance. According to his experience, children were more encouraged to study music and sports rather than fundamental classes such as math:

“They were sending children to janissary band⁴⁸, rather than teaching them math. These children will take exams and they are not asking about the janissary music in the exams. I stood against this practice and

⁴¹ Ibid, p.4.

⁴² <https://www.unicef.org/turkey/%C3%A7ocuk-ya%C5%9Fta-evlilik> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴³ <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/turk%C4%B1yede-kiz-cocuklar%C4%B1-evlilikleri-onlenebiliyor-mu/5617098.html> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁴ <http://www.ii2ii.eu/siroma-project-technical-assistance-for-promoting-social-inclusion-in-densely-roman-populated-areas-project> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁵ <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/800449> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁶ <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/244222-roman-dernekleri-plan-var-ama-eylem-yok> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁷ <https://www.ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁴⁸“In the Turkish tradition, janissary music is a sign of majesty, splendour and might, rather than a vehicle for merriment. The majestic and sacred nature of the state are reflected in the banging of the drum. The unity of the people and the

things have changed slightly. But it's not in our hands. I distanced myself from the school, then distanced my child from the school. They think that these children cannot become anything, this is the mindset, and it's impossible to change it. We had to enroll our child in another school."

Eren Çekiç was also critical of SIROMA, saying that the implementation of the project was discriminatory and ignorant:

"As part of the SIROMA project, they placed containers in school gardens for study groups after school hours. This is discrimination. While other students were heading back home, Roma children were expected to study in containers. Many of the association directors objected, but the containers stayed. They are in possession of the schools for 5 years. The containers are locked but still present in school gardens, it's like an embarrassment museum."

Eren Çekiç also said that they have not received any updates or monitoring reports about SIROMA and therefore cannot assess the success of the project.

6.4. Economic Crisis and the Pandemic

Projects like SIROMA are supporting the Roma to access schools and education even though they are highly criticized by the Roma civil society actors. In addition, there are more universities available for students graduating from high school. While there were only 71 universities and 1,5 million university students in 2001, the number has risen to 204 universities and 8 million university students in 2020.⁴⁹ The increasing number of universities encourages more Roma students to continue their studies at a higher level and gain a profession. Also, there are student scholarships and student credits available for higher education that support poor students to continue with their studies. For instance, the Roma Education Fund Scholarship Program⁵⁰ provides scholarships for Roma who have graduated from higher education. However, the efforts to encourage Roma children's access to education were significantly interrupted with the economic crisis and the pandemic.

Since 2018, Turkey is facing a currency and debt crisis. In December 2021, Turkish Lira fell to a record low against the dollar, trading at 17 and losing 55 percent of its value against the US currency.⁵¹ Unemployment stayed at 11.2% in November 2022 which amounts to 3 million 777 people with the youth unemployment rate in the 15-24 age group increasing to 22.3%.⁵² Since 2018, an increasing number of university graduates are either unemployed or working at low-paid jobs.

Roma university graduates are suffering from unemployment as well and as university graduates, they do not want to work in traditional or street jobs. As a result, the Roma university graduates end up unemployed, and it has led many in the Roma community to question the worth of higher education. Many of the interviewees said that Roma families question whether studying in third-level education can lead to worthwhile employment. Skepticism over higher education is prompted not only by the current economic

greatness of the state are particularly important concepts in the Turkish view of the nation. This belief and tradition was also to be found in the pre-Islamic Turkish states, and those of the Seljuks and the Ottomans, and very little has since changed.” During the Ottoman ruling, janissaries were a unique form of “state slavery”, composed of tributary children of Christians. See <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-98653/janissary-mehter-music.html> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

[illegible]

⁵⁰<https://www.romaeducationfund.org/scholarships-en/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵¹ <https://www.tomeaeducationfund.org/scholarships-en/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-cenbank-intervenes-fx-market-lira-hits-17-dollar-2021-12-17/>
(Retrieved February 7, 2022).

⁵²<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkiyes-unemployment-rate-at-112-in-november/2469747> (Retrieved February 7, 2021).

crisis, but arises from generations of suspicion and the experience of discrimination. According to the interviewees, this skepticism about the merits of higher education has left its mark on the young generation, who now see that third level study offers no guarantee of economic stability.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic since 2019 has had an enormous impact on the Roma as had revealed the “extreme exposure of excluded and marginalized Roma communities to negative health and socioeconomic impacts”.⁵³ Many countries implemented lockdowns and restrictions on travel and education. In Turkey, 5 days after the announcement of the first Covid-19 patient in Turkey on 11 March 2020, the schools were shut down until the end of the school year. Only pre-school education was available from 1-19 June 2020. The Ministry of Education launched the Digital Education Network (EBA) on 23 March 2020, and set up 3 new channels to broadcast classes on TV. Online education continued until 1 February 2021, then schools started opening according to a timeline. Between 29 April and 17 May 2021, the Ministry decided to close all the schools for all levels and continue with online education due to the increasing number of Covid-19 patients. With the vaccination campaign and new measurements, the schools have been opened since the beginning of the 2020-21 school year.

The pandemic had a significant impact on Roma students. Most of the Roma students had little or no access to online education. Suffering from poverty, many families do not have the necessary tools, such as cell phones, computers, and tablets, to access online education. Even if they did, they did not have access to the internet. There were classes available on TV but some families do not even have TV or electricity, and therefore their children could not attend classes. Also, in most cases, children needed assistance from the family members to organize the online setting and follow their studies.

Elmas Köçkün referred to her brother as an example of the online education process:

“He is in 6th grade but his reading is not up to the level. Every Roma neighborhood I go to, every Rom child I talk to, they have no access to online classes. They fell behind in the class.”

Similar to Elmas Köçkün, Erdal Yalçın said that the vast majority of children could not access online education due to lack of electronic devices, internet or the encouragement of their families. Due to the complexity of accessing the online education, parents’ involvement and encouragement played a big role in online education.

Eren Çekiç complained about the lack of implementation of the Roma workshop by the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality.⁵⁴ The workshop recommendations included pre-school education centers and study groups in every Roma neighborhood. However, the Municipality only opened a center in Sulukule.

“If they had opened pre-school centers and study groups in every Roma neighborhood, we would not have been talking about the lack of education during the pandemic,” Eren Çekiç said.

Although Halit Keser agreed with the interviewees about the negative impact of online education on children, saying that due to pandemic rules, Roma children could pass their classes without taking exams:

“In a way, Corona was useful for Roma children. Most of them used to quit high school but due to Corona, they could pass their classes naturally. But have they learned anything? No, they haven’t learned anything.”

⁵³https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030_0.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵⁴The İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality organized a Roma Workshop on 14 December 2019 with representatives of the Roma civil society and Roma politicians. As a result of the workshop, the Municipality prepared a list of recommendations to be taken for the social integration of the Roma in İstanbul. See <https://calistay.ibb.istanbul/roman-calistayi/>.

Roma children who were studying in other districts were spending 30-40 TL (2-3 Euros), but during the pandemic, they didn't have any school expenses. Those who could access the system continued their studies. But I don't know how it will result in the future."

Hacer Foggo, who has founded the Deep Poverty Network during the Covid-19 pandemic to help the poor in Istanbul, said that the pandemic has created a new low for the people in deep poverty:

"We do not only help the Roma, but we also help all people in deep poverty. But the problems are the same: they are all suffering from hunger. These people were already poor, but now are they fighting hunger every single day. I saw people who cannot afford to buy diapers for their babies, therefore wrapping them with plastic bags."

Hacer Foggo also said that during the pandemic, the families who could not afford to pay their rents, had to move out of their houses and move in with their relatives, and some of them constantly move from one house to the other. According to a report⁵⁵ by the Deep Poverty Network, people who work in daily jobs or street jobs and in deep poverty are at risk of hunger, losing their houses, and cannot afford the livelihood and fundamental needs.

A UN Women report⁵⁶ states that an alarming increase in violence against women and girls across the world have been reported during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of social isolation measures. Although there is no official data, women's rights activists in Turkey indicated "a considerable increase in cases of domestic violence during the lockdown".⁵⁷ In parallel with these reports, most of the interviewees claimed that due to economic crisis and the pandemic isolation, the domestic violence has increased among the Roma communities. The increasing domestic violence impacted children more, especially because the children could not go to school and therefore spent more time at home.

According to a report⁵⁸, enrollment in schools is declining after the age of 14. While the enrollment of students who were born in 2002 was 86.3 percent for the 2018-2019 school year, it decreased to 81.3 percent for the 2019-2020 school year, showing that at least 5 percent of students who were born in 2002 dropped out of school during the pandemic. As early dropouts are more common among the Roma students, more Roma students are expected to quit studying during or after the pandemic. The report by the Deep Poverty Network indicates that 11.3 percent of the students they interviewed will not be able to go back to school after the pandemic⁵⁹. A report by ILO and UNICEF⁶⁰ suggests that the number of precarious people in deep poverty will increase. Another report by ILO and UNICEF suggests that "a further 8.9 million children will be in child labor by the end of 2022 as a result of rising poverty driven by the pandemic"⁶¹, meaning that especially children from precarious groups, including the Roma, will quit studying and start working.

⁵⁵ <https://derinyoksullukagi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Research-on-Deep-Poverty-and-Access-to-Human-Rights-During-the-Pandemic-Suggestions-for-Local-Governments-for-Crisis-Intervention-Programs-1.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵⁶ https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20un/fp/publications/2020/external%20brief/external%20brief%20for%20publication%206%2019/i/impact%20of%20covid-19_v08_single%20page-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=5117 (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/domestic-violence-rises-in-turkey-during-covid-19-pandemic/a-53082333> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵⁸ <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/egitim-izleme-raporu-2020-ogrenciler-ve-egitime-erisim/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁵⁹ <https://tr.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Pandemi%20d%C3%B6neminde%20derin%20yoksulluk%20ve%20haklara%20eri%C5%9Fim%20ara%C5%9F%C4%B1rmalar%C4%B1-Yerel%20Y%C3%B6netimler%20Kriz%20D%C3%B6nemi%20Sosyal%20Destek.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁶⁰ https://www.ilo.org/ankara/areas-of-work/covid-19/WCMS_751230/lang--tr/index.htm (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁶¹ https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/informationresources/WCMS_797515/lang--en/index.htm (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

Kemal Vural Tarlan, who is running a school project for the Dom students in Gaziantep to integrate Dom students to schools, said that the main problem with Dom children is the attendance and it is mostly related to the discrimination towards Dom students:

“There is a lot of discrimination at schools. The teachers sit the Dom students at the back, cuts the communication with them. I have seen a lot of classrooms where they even leave some desks empty between the students on the front and the Dom students in the back.”

Kemal Vural Tarlan said that they are trying to overcome the attendance issues and discrimination at schools by covering the school expenses of the Dom students, training the teachers about inclusiveness, and including families in the process to create a tracking system. However, according to Kemal Vural Tarlan, the pandemic hit the Dom students the worst:

“Dom students lost two years during the pandemic. As families got poorer, the parents cannot afford the livelihood and they need child labor. And the children already cannot access online education due to poverty.”

7. ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH

Roma in Turkey usually work at daily jobs that are not particularly favored by other segments of society, such as collecting garbage, recycling paper, trading cheap commodities, cleaning, seasonal agriculture work, and playing musical instruments at restaurants. Some still work in traditional works such as basket-weaving, tin-smithing, and forging metals. However, as the traditional occupations are disappearing, most Roma end up in low-paid daily jobs which require manual labor. These jobs are unregistered and unofficial, therefore do not offer the guarantee of insurance, social services, and unemployment or retirement pay. Mostly working without any social security, Roma are trapped in the routine of working and making money daily, which leaves them precarious to poverty if they do not get to work even for one day. One day without work means sleeping hungry for them. The irregularity in income and lack of social security prevents them from accessing their fundamental rights. Due to the low education and lack of marketable skills, unemployment has always been very high among the Roma.

Nurcan Purçu said that due to the harsh conditions of working outdoor, in her case working in basket-weaving, many Roma suffer from various illnesses:

“My father works in basket-weaving, he even works 3 am after working all day long. He says his hands go numb when he doesn’t work. When you look at the hands of Roma, you cannot distinguish whether they belong to a man or a woman, they are covered in calluses. They deal with illnesses at young ages. Respiratory illnesses, cervical disc hernia, spinal disc hernia, muscle and joint illnesses are very common.”

Yücel Tural said that while in the past the Roma were more involved in production jobs such as basketry, forging metals, and tin-smithing; however, these jobs have yielded to developing industries as of late 1980s and 1990s. Because the Roma could not get involved in new jobs due to lack of education, more and more Roma are begging on the streets, Yücel Tural added.

Similarly, Kemal Vural Tarlan said that Dom people used to work in dentistry, pulling teeth and bonding teeth in gold but their profession has been banned by the Turkish authorities and therefore most of them migrated to Middle Eastern countries to continue with their profession. The number of Dom people in the Middle East is estimated around five million and they live “in almost all Middle Eastern countries”.⁶² However, due to the rising population and the developing mass production, Dom people are unable to work in traditional jobs and they had to “take refuge in the cities, working there as laborers or unskilled workers”.⁶³ The Syrian Dom who are seeking refuge in Turkey have “immense difficulty in finding jobs”, they work in casual jobs or collect waste for recycling, and most of the time they work for long hours for low payments.⁶⁴

Reminding that the Turkish Dom people who used to work in Çukurova⁶⁵, the Black Sea Region or the Aegean region as seasonal workers, Kemal Vural Tarlan said that nowadays they cannot find jobs in these places and turned into mobile families who are migrating for work not on seasons but all the year-round:

“They have evolved into families with no house or home, moving around for any seasonal work all year round. Men in the families are finding the work and mostly the women and the children of the families are working.”

⁶² https://www.academia.edu/23704462/The_Dom_of_Syria_The_other_refugees (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Çukurova, or known as Cilician Plain, is a large fertile plain in Southern Turkey. Many agricultural workers migrate to the Çukurova during harvest seasons to work in the farms.

7.1. Employment During the Pandemic

The pandemic of coronavirus hit the Roma community worse than the others, as the street jobs were banned due to the quarantines and most of the Roma have not received any sustainable support from the authorities. According to a report⁶⁶ by the Deep Poverty Network, half of the interviewees had access to regular aid mostly from the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality, individuals, state institutions, local governors, and municipalities. 53 percent of those who could access aid said that they were receiving aid from at least two different institutions. Social aid to Roma and other poor communities is mainly received in different forms such as food, covering child care expenses, paying the rent and the bills, covering health and education expenses. The research indicates that for families without a regular income, social aid can become the only regular income or the main source of living.

While some of the Roma can easily access the aids provided by the local and national authorities, others are facing difficulties in accessing aid due to illiteracy and lack of information. Nurcan Purçu said that even for small amounts of support aid, long procedures such as collecting documents and filling out applications are required, and these requirements can be discriminative for the applicants. According to the research by the Deep Poverty Network, Roma applicants can be rejected based on reasons such as lack of official residency address or lack of official divorce verdict. However, as mentioned above in the “Access to Housing” chapter, Roma can change their houses frequently and therefore cannot register their address every time they move to a new place. Also, the Roma still perceive divorce as a taboo. Therefore, if a Roma woman wants to divorce her husband, she usually ends up separated and does not continue with the legal process. It reveals a disconnect between the eligibility requirements for social support and the reality.

Halit Keser was more critical of the Roma civil society, saying that they should have educated the Roma community better in accessing social rights and aid:

“As Roma civil society, we should have taken serious steps, we were inadequate in educating Roma about how to access the aids given by the municipality and the state, we should have taught them how the process works. That’s why the Roma failed to access aid during the pandemic. I would like to run a project about how the public system works and how the Roma can apply to aid. There should be an information desk or unit to guide people, it is very necessary, they cannot benefit from the state’s offerings.”

Orhan Tanyel disagreed with Halit Keser, saying that more people are informed about the procedures of accessing aid:

“I think Roma are less ignorant and they are more able to express themselves. There is a small number of Roma who cannot access aid. If they can prove that they are in need, they apply to the local authorities, social services. But how much aid can they get? 300 TL (20 Euros), 500 TL (35 Euros). What can you do with that much money?”

According to Kemal Vural Tarlan, Dom people are hesitant to apply for aid, although they live in poverty:

“I don’t think the Dom people are accessing aid. Compared to the Roma, fewer Dom are applying for aid because they still have trust issues while corresponding with the public authorities. They have a saying -Do not ever ride a donkey if it is provided by the state. So, they keep distant from the authorities.”

⁶⁶ <https://tr.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Pandemi%20d%C3%B6neminde%20derin%20yoksulluk%20ve%20haklara%20eri%C5%9Fim%20ara%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rmas%C4%B1-Yerel%20Y%C3%B6netimlere%20Kriz%20D%C3%B6nemi%20Sosyal%20Destek.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

Erdal Yalçın said that Roma are destined to live in a “vicious circle”, as the children cannot continue with their studies and gain a profession, most of them are forced to illegal ways and drugs.

“Due to the pandemic, even the musicians started to sell drugs. When you sell drugs, it’s sweet money, it’s a lot of money, it changes your life. You live in a better house; you buy a car. You start to live in that vicious circle. Most of them end up in jail and their families cannot afford the same style, so they go back to living in slums.”

While Erdal Yalçın claimed that drug sellers are held in low regard by the residents of the neighborhood, Eyüp Demirezen said that in some neighborhoods, drug trafficking becomes the new normal:

“It is difficult to save a person from the drug trade and addiction, it takes a long time and a lot of effort. After a while, people get used to it. People used to stigmatize the drug sellers, but now they make money, they buy houses and cars, they walk into places with confidence and people accept them. But when the drug seller is caught and sent to jail, everything ends.”

The heaviest toll of the pandemic was on Romani musicians. Although restaurants were opened from time to time, bars and clubs were closed for 16 months. They were opened on 1 July 2021 but the authorities banned music after midnight. During the pandemic, 103 musicians, mostly Roma, committed suicide⁶⁷ due to the economic deadlock. Erdal Yalçın said that many musicians had to sell their instruments and take difficult jobs, such as collecting paper from garbage for recycling, and many of them felt humiliated and depressed.

Fırat Gezer, a Rom musician from İzmir, said that many Roma musicians committed suicide because they were emotional people who could not bear the humiliation of hunger and poverty. Fırat Gezer himself could not work during the pandemic, could not afford his basic needs, and attempted suicide several times by overdosing on drugs. He said that he is not a drug addict but because he tried to commit suicide with drugs, people labeled him as a drug addict and he cannot get a job at restaurants because of the stigmatization.

Erdal Yalçın also said that he witnessed how some widowed women, who previously worked as cleaners and lost their jobs due to the lockdowns, turned to sex work to make a living.

Yücel Tural highlighted the pandemic’s psychological toll on the Roma women, saying that they have lost their jobs and economic freedom due to the lockdowns and restrictions, and the domestic violence have increased during the pandemic:

“Roma women are very much involved in life; they support the family economically. But they could not work during the pandemic. They could not socialize. I observed their psychological hardship. Before the pandemic, they were making money and they had more freedom, now they are very limited in life. They became more passive. The economic fall down created other issues, such as an increase in domestic violence.”

Like many respondents, Olgun Çaylı said that most of Roma did not follow the Covid-19 restrictions and quarantine and against all the odds, they continued to go out and socialize within their neighborhoods and some of them continued to work:

“They [Roma] never stayed at home, they visited their neighbors, the grocery shops stayed open during the quarantines. They cannot afford to buy food if they do not go to cleaning or do not collect scrap. You do not have the luxury to shut these people indoor. Whenever they [officials] tried to impose lockdown or fine people, they faced a huge backlash.”

⁶⁷ <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/muzisyenler-meslektaslari-icin-soyledi-muzik-susmaz-haber-1522465> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

7.2. Discrimination During Employment

The main obstacles faced by the Roma while accessing employment are prejudice and discrimination. The Roma are stigmatized based on the neighborhoods they live in, their skin colors, and clothes even when they are well educated and socially integrated. Due to the long history of discrimination, many of them hide their identities in workplaces or during job applications.

Eren Çekiç said that he feels ‘heartbroken’ whenever he faces discrimination at work:

“They discriminate in a very indirect, polite way. They do not ask about your ethnicity, they understand from the way you act, talk. When you build trust, you come out and then their behaviors change. They correct what you say, they make fun of what you say, they would not want to believe in things that you say, although you know these things by heart. You cannot make sense of it; you cannot name it. In time you realize what’s going on.”

Many respondents referred to the discrimination during the hiring process, especially due to the addresses of the applicants. They said that if the applicant’s address is a well-known Roma neighborhood, then the employers eliminate their CVs. Halit Keser said that if the applicant lives in any of the well-known neighborhoods in İzmir, it is very difficult for that person to be invited to a job interview:

“If your skin is darker and your accent is broken, then you have no chance. If they have alternatives, they do not prefer you. [The discrimination] is not declining, and it does not look like it will decline. Some people’s minds do not change.”

Ten years ago in Ankara, Yücel Tatal carried out a testing exercise to uncover anti-Roma discrimination during the hiring process. A restaurant was looking for a chief waiter. Yücel Tatal selected a Rom and a non-Roma person who had similar education and experience. He asked the Romani candidate to apply first. In his CV, he declared that he was from a well-known Roma neighborhood in Ankara. The restaurant said they will call him later. Then Yücel Tatal asked the non-Roma candidate to apply for the position and he was immediately asked to start working.

“When they figure out that you are Roma, it doesn’t matter what your profession is, they hire you with prejudice, they treat you with prejudice. There are many Roma who had to quit their jobs because of discrimination. How they discriminate you can change depending on the job, sometimes they give you more work, sometimes they harass you verbally, asking stuff like whether all the Roma are thieves.”

Certain that there will always be discrimination during the hiring process, Orhan Tanyel said that in Sakarya, they are combatting the discrimination by using the media effectively:

“There has always been and always will be discrimination. But the situation is getting better. As Sakarya Roma Association, we made our struggle visible to the people of Sakarya. We highlighted in the media that our people can work and integrate. We explained to the people that there should not be prejudice through showing good examples.”

According to Orhan Tanyel, discrimination not only affects the psychology of the Roma but also creates obstacles against creating new role models for children:

“We have very few students studying at university. I voiced it many times, if they want us to transform and integrate, they should employ our university graduates in proper jobs to create an example for the children. So that the children can be influenced to live like them. I’ve shared their CVs with the ministries, I’ve voiced it

to local authorities but none of them applied positive discrimination and put in the effort to employ them. I could not get any of them employed in a proper job. They are all unemployed.”

Kemal Vural Tarlan said that Dom people face discrimination even at low-paid jobs:

“In textile mills, when they understand that the worker is Dom or Abdal, they fire that person, stigmatize them as thieves. Dom seasonal workers avoid going to some regions, saying that the farm owners do not give them jobs because they are Gypsies, or let them do the job and then report them to the Gendarmerie to evacuate them and avoid paying them.”

7.3. The Green Card System

Since most of the Roma population work at unregistered jobs, they lack any social security including health insurance. In Turkey, general health insurance is available to people who are not registered with the Social Security Service with monthly payments. But for those, who cannot even afford the monthly payment of the Social Security Services, free health services are available through ‘the green card’ system.⁶⁸ According to the Social Services, if the income per person in the family is less than one third of the minimum wage, they can benefit from a green card and access health services without any payment.⁶⁹ Also, children who are under 18 and cannot benefit from their parent’s health insurance, high school graduates (up to 20 years old) and university graduates (who are under 25) who are not covered under any insurance and cannot benefit from their parents’ insurance, people who are over 65 and receiving an elderly pension, people who are receiving a disability pension and people who are protected according to the Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women and cannot benefit from health insurance can apply to the green card⁷⁰.

Most of the respondents confirmed that the majority of Roma people apply for a green card and access free health services. As the Turkish health system improved in the last 20 years, Roma have increasingly accessed health services. While the vast majority of the respondents said that most of the Roma can access health services without any obstacles and discrimination, Olgun Çaylı disagreed with them, saying that there is institutional racism towards Roma rooted deeply in the health services:

“Doctors do not want to treat Roma patients; they transfer them to the university hospital. Even my wife was discriminated against when she was pregnant. The doctor said that the baby had a cardiac defect and there was an issue with the baby’s intestines. She told us to go to the university hospital. But the scanning proved that what the doctor was telling us was untrue. I said I will report her. But when you report someone, they do not believe in your statement, they do not start the legal procedure. We reported her to the Chief Doctor, to the Health Ministry’s helpline, but nothing happened, not even a warning. So, we had to change our doctor.”

Olgun Çaylı also claimed that a Roma friend of his, who works at the hospital, heard the doctors talking about Roma patients, saying that Roma stink and that they should not exist, should not reproduce. Although there are no cases of forced sterilization of Roma in Turkey, there have been examples of this practice and grave violations of the reproductive rights of Roma in Eastern European countries. For instance, a three-month investigation run by the Center for Reproductive Rights and the Centre for Civil and Human Rights in 2002 revealed the coerced and forced sterilization practices in Slovakia.⁷¹ From the 1960s onwards, the communist government of then Czechoslovakia enacted an official policy of sterilizing women from the Roma

⁶⁸ Although the system is not called ‘the green card’ anymore, most of the poor and disadvantaged people, including the Roma, continue to refer to it as a green card. Therefore, it will be referred to as ‘the green card system’ in this report.

⁶⁹ <https://www.isvesosyalguvenlik.com/ucretsiz-saglik-yarimlarindan-yararlanma-yesil-kart-sartlari/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ <https://reproductiverights.org/body-and-soul-forced-sterilization-and-other-assaults-on-roma-reproductive-freedom/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

community, whom the authorities described as ‘culturally substandard’. Such practices survived the fall of communism, and potentially thousands of Roma women were unlawfully sterilized by the state between 1966 and 2012.⁷²

According to Yücel Tatal, serious health issues that are caused by early marriages should be addressed in terms of accessing health services:

“The early marriages can start at the age of 14. How can a child be healthy, when she is looking after another child? How can she benefit from health services?”

Yücel Tatal also referred to the institutional discrimination while accessing the health services:

“We receive complaints about health workers. They discriminate against the Roma due to their skin color, clothes, and accents. They prefer to examine without touching them, they prescribe medicine and send them away without treating them.”

Kemal Vural Tarlan said that Dom people can access the first step of the health system which are family doctors and family health centers, but they have difficulties in accessing the second and third steps of the services, including chronic illness treatments and operations:

“There are fewer issues with accessibility since the family doctors and family health centers are widely available. But Dom people face discrimination while being treated for chronic illnesses or operations.”

According to Kemal Vural Tarlan, the discrimination towards the Syrian Dom can have fatal consequences :

“At the end of 2019, a Syrian Dom woman who was pregnant went to a hospital. The doctor did not examine her because she was a Gypsy. The doctor stereotyped her because of her clothes. So, she went back to her tent, she and her baby died during labor.”

Kemal Vural Tarlan also said that Dom people are worried about going to hospitals due to their traditional codes and beliefs:

“Especially among the Middle Eastern Dom communities, being close to death and cemeteries means your soul will get dirty. Therefore, they do not go to hospitals to avoid being close to the dead. There was a Syrian Dom family, and the grandfather in the family was very ill, although we have insisted that he should see a doctor, he avoided it, saying that he has never been to a hospital in his life. A Syrian doctor was visiting his house and giving him medicine. His family only could take him to a hospital when he was unconscious, but after few days he passed away.”

⁷²<https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/02/the-shameful-story-of-roma-women-s-forced-sterilisation-in-central-europe> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

8. ROMA MOBILIZATION

In the 2000s, with the increasing mobilization of civil society in Turkey, Roma started to mobilize as well. Article 5 of the Law on Associations were forbidding ethnic connotation in the name of the associations and NGOs and focus that implied an ethnic, racial, sectarian, or cultural diversity and the Roma in Turkey were not allowed to establish a Roma-focused organization. With a change in the Law on Associations; ethnic, racial, sectarian, or cultural diversity was allowed for the associations. The first Roma association with “Roma” in its name, Edirne Romanlar Derneği (EDROM), was founded in Edirne in 2004.⁷³ Following the foundation of EDROM, many new Roma associations and non-governmental organizations flourished across Turkey. Until 2013, Turkey’s civil society rapidly increased as a result of the democratic climate due to the country’s significant efforts in the European Union accession process. This ‘wind’ of democracy had an important impact on the Roma civil society, and Roma formed many associations as well as regional and national federations. In 2012, Roma Rights Forum (ROMFO), a Roma platform with a rights-based perspective, was founded with the participation of four Roma federations and 60 Roma associations to promote Roma identity, culture, and lifestyle.⁷⁴ However, the Roma mobilization was criticized for having wide claims but lacking the “capacity to actually engage in professional activities”.⁷⁵ The Roma NGOs’ claims are wide, but they lack capacity to actually engage in professional activities. The Roma mobilization was also criticized for having leaders who are part of the “older” generation and for lacking representation of the youth or women.⁷⁶

For Elmas Köçkün, the delayed Roma mobilization in Turkey is still at an early stage and advancing cautiously:

“The mobilization is progressing very slowly. Access to housing, health, and education is still our primary issue and it leads to other indirect problems. So, the mobilization is centered around the issues. We try to observe the process by criticizing the mistakes and encouraging the right moves.”

The election of Özcan Purçu, the first Roma MP, in 2015 was a breaking point for the Roma community in Turkey. Purçu’s election from the Republican People’s Party (CHP) highlighted the importance of Roma voters and in the next elections which took place in 2018, the governing Justice and Development Party appointed Cemal Bekle, a Roma candidate, who was elected as the second Roma MP. Currently, both Özcan Purçu and Cemal Bekle are elected MPs and representing the Roma at the parliament.

Elmas Köçkün said that the Roma community welcomed their elections with happiness, hopes, and excitement:

“When the first Roma MP was elected, we were so excited since we never had a representative before. Now we have two MPs.”

The political representation of the Roma continued with the establishment of a Roma-focused political party named “Güzel Parti” (Beautiful Party) in September 2020.⁷⁷ The party was founded by actors from civil society with the aim of better representation of the Roma.

⁷³ <https://demokrasigunlugu.com/romanlar/turkiyenin-ilk-roman-dernegi-kuruldu> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁷⁴ <https://ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁷⁵ https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30304/1/4594_Oprisan.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/hurriyet-pazar/romanlarin-ilk-partisi-kuruldu-bizim-icin-once-insan-41604088> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

Although Yücel Tural was happy to have representatives at the parliament, he also said that other politicians are paying less attention to their problems:

"I wish the Roma MPs had never been elected. Before they had been elected, we would go to the political parties and all the MPs, senior ranking people of the political parties would pay attention to us. Now, they send us to the Roma MPs. We used to have 550 MPs, now we only have 2. The Roma question should become a party policy, whether they have a Rom MP or not."

Similarly, Elmas Köçkün said that they warned the MPs to put the welfare of the Roma before their own political agendas:

"As Neve Terne⁷⁸, we have released a statement, saying that political parties should not leave Roma in the shadows for their political interests, that they should develop solutions for the community."

Orhan Tanyel, who was a nomination candidate in the last elections, complained about the unfair representation of the Roma among other ethnic MPs:

"In Sakarya, there are more than 40,000 Roma. They cannot be underestimated. We also have Çerkes [Caucasian] sisters and brothers in Sakarya, they constitute between 20,000 and 25,000 but they have 2 MPs, one from the İyi Party (Good Party) and one from the CHP (Republican People's Party). We do not get an offer or anything. They do not even think we are worth anything. But we are aiming to unite. We will display our unity and then see where things are going."

Nurcan Purçu said that polarization among the Roma actors and their methods are creating obstacles for the future of the Roma movement:

"They cannot unite. There are 2 different views, one is pro-associations, they want to find funding, run projects, and make money; the other one is against associations, saying that they do not need funding and they can mobilize on their own. These views clash very often, so they cannot unite and raise their voices."

For Eyüp Demirezen, Roma mobilization started with the Roma Opening, accelerated in time but currently heading down. He said that actors of the process got tired because they could not get receive any response, and the trend is over. Eyüp Demirezen also complained about the negative impact of partisanship among the Roma civil society:

"Directors of [Roma] Associations were recruited to municipalities. When they left, the associations were done. It became political. They [municipalities] ask for your votes, if you say your votes are for them, they recruit you. Everything turns around politics."

Olgun Çaylı had a pessimist take on the Roma representation, saying that there is no real will to represent the community:

"I don't think they [the Roma] are represented. We have 2 MPs but they are avoided by politicians. Both the government and the opposition make eyewash moves, they target the elite Roma and present it like they do something for the Roma. I don't believe they want to represent the Roma."

Nurcan Purçu was disappointed with the Roma representation as well:

⁷⁸Neve Terne is a civil society platform founded by Roma university graduates in Turkey. See <https://twitter.com/neveterneroma>.

“Roma representation does not make Roma issues more visible because they cannot express themselves well. There may be some issues voiced by the representatives but they can express these issues much better, without agitation or romanticization and in a more transparent way.”

Critical of the Roma mobilization and representation, Halit Keser said that the only real obstacle the Roma are facing is themselves:

“We have 2 elected [Roma] MPs but the Roma civil society is finished. It’s lost its force. When you voice these concerns, MPs get angry. They want to run everything, they did not leave their duties in civil society, even after they were elected. They do not leave space for civil society. They only collaborate with associations that are their pawns. The associations which are not involved in politics, which can become the bridge between the state and the Roma, which can defend rights are not valued.”

While Orhan Tanyel was happy with the Roma representation at the Parliament, saying that Özcan Purçu’s representation made Roma issues more visible; Halit Keser disagreed, saying that the Roma MPs are monopolizing the Roma civil society and the purpose is lost:

“They think if we have MPs representing us, then the Roma issue will be solved. I do not expect much from the Roma associations as well, they are after becoming MPs. It’s not like we have founded these associations to become MPs or make politics. The purpose is lost. We used to get angry with Gadge for profiting from the Roma cause. Now our people are doing the same, profiting from us. We have nearly 600 Roma associations but how many of them are useful? First, we need to discuss this issue.”

Yücel Tural pointed out the politicization of the associations as a serious obstacle for the mobilization:

“Politicization of associations is more than being involved in politics, some of them became the back garden of political parties. This is preventing the Roma mobilization from rooting on a sound basis. It upsets us to see that there are no rights-based Roma associations.”

According to Eren Çekiç, the politicization of the Roma movement is causing rights violations:

“In 2018, the CHP (Republican People’s Party) prepared a Roma action plan but they have only shared it with CHP municipalities, they haven’t shared it with the civil society. The report includes actions about housing, but the MP goes to a house with a broken roof and does not take any action. The mayor does not take any action. The government has an action plan but they don’t take any action. What will happen to that broken roof? The over-politicization creates destruction and they cannot fix it.”

Referring to the disappointment of the Roma with the local authorities, Eren Çekiç said that many Roma campaigned during the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality elections with the hope of getting decent employment. However, after the elections, they were employed in low or unwanted positions:

“They thought CHP was better for Roma as no Roma was employed during the AKP (Justice and Development Party) era. They campaigned for CHP during the elections. Now they are employed in cleaning gardens and toilets. They want to be employed as drivers, but they are given toilet-cleaning jobs. They worked so hard, and this is the result.”

Orhan Tanyel said that he doesn’t believe that the authorities want the Roma to mobilize:

“Mobilizing means accessing your rights one way or another. It means in every city, in every district people will gather and emerge, they will access the opportunities of the city the best and fastest way. It means the people will be a part of the process. And I don’t think they [authorities] want it.”

Eren Çekiç stated that during Roma mobilization, things went wrong from the beginning and resulted in a political breakdown:

“The Roma community is going after politics. Even small neighborhood organizations became political. I have lost friends only because of politics. I used to encourage young people to become role models, to fix wrongdoings, but now I tell them not to get involved, tell them that they could get hurt. We got involved in [civil society] as volunteers, we spent our money to do things with the young people, but they do not even let us do it. They encourage the young people to campaign for politics by promising them jobs. We cannot end this political polarization and the MPs are the ones fueling it the most.”

Hacer Foggo said that due to the efforts to save Sulukule, the Roma in Turkey became more visible and the visibility increased the awareness in the society. The rise in awareness created funding opportunities for Roma which spiked the number of Roma associations and the associations formed federations. According to Hacer Foggo, the Roma civil society expanded without sufficient knowledge and experience. And following the Gezi Park protests, Hacer Foggo said, the Roma civil society dramatically became polarized and partisan. As a significant figure in the Roma civil society, Hacer Foggo observed the difficulty of working in such a polarized and hostile environment:

“We wanted to at least work on the mutual issues and we were declared traitors and terrorists, everybody went after each other. Everybody is associated with political parties and runs their activities within the political parties.”

According to Kemal Vural Tarlan, Dom people are perceived as “Kurdish Gypsies” since they live with Gypsies, and they are an ignored community even within the Roma civil society:

“There is almost no Dom organization, they do not have the strong NGOs and networks like the Roma. There are no studies on the Kurdish question and how it’s reflected on the Dom community. In Turkey and the Middle East, the Dom people are invisible. Everybody knows they exist, but they live on the margins.”

Saying that the young Dom generation in Turkey is observing the rights and wrongs of the Roma mobilization, Kemal Vural Tarlan said that he expects them to open a new fresh page in the civil society and represent the Dom people.

8.1. Roma Opening Process: Was it More Than a Declaration?

As part of the EU accession process, the Turkish government launched initiatives for minorities by starting opening processes for the Alevi and Kurds along with the Roma. However, unlike the Alevi and Kurds, the Roma had only recently mobilized, and did not have a strong political voice or representation. The Roma mobilization and the Roma Opening proceeded during the same period and in an entangled manner.⁷⁹ The Roma Opening was launched in 2010, following a seminar organized by the government with the participation of 130 Roma associations and 11 federations in 2009. At the end of the seminar, a report was incorporated by the participants which listed the prior issues as : a) Social Prejudices; b) Education; c) Unemployment and Vocational Training; d) Shelter – Housing; e) Health; f) Organization; g) Discriminatory Provisions and Law Enforcement Agencies’ Approach; h) Identity Papers; and i) The Decade for the Roma Project.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ <https://ethos-europe.eu/sites/default/files/ethosd5.2turkey.pdf> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸⁰ https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30304/1/4594_Oprisan.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

Following the Roma Opening, different ministries organized seminars and workshops, initiated Roma inclusion plans and positive discrimination for the Roma. However, none of these plans and actions were implemented regularly and in long term. The Opening Process lost its pace in years and the European Commission continued to emphasize the need for comprehensive measures to facilitate the social inclusion of the Roma population. In 2016, the Ministry of Family and Social Services released the Roma Strategy Document⁸¹ and an Action Plan as part of the visa liberalization agreement between the European Commission and Turkey. The Strategy Document indicated measures to improve the living conditions and socio-economic status of the Roma and ensure their access to fundamental rights. However, the Strategy Document was criticized highly for not including the scale of activities envisaged or how they might be implemented, for not including any details on the assessment of the objectives, and for lacking targets, data, benchmarks, costing, and earmarked funding.⁸² The Opening Process was also criticized for failing to fulfill the promises and instrumentalized by the government as “a populist approach mainly to serve its own interests” to respond to the EU demands.⁸³

“In this preliminary form, this document stands as a draft declaration of intent but lacks any of the details that would make it a strategy.” Bernard Rorke, ERRC

Like most of the interviewees, Hacer Foggo was critical of the Strategy Plan, saying that the Strategy Document and the Action Plan lacked most of the aspects suggested by the Roma civil society:

“The Roma Strategy Plan was only 19 pages, there was nothing from our draft. The plan is not sufficient to be an association charter. Still, it is an important gain to have that plan published against all the odds. For instance, we have suggested a monitoring group for the plan and they formed the monitoring group but it consists of partisans.”

According to Yücel Tural, Roma mobilization made progress in terms of addressing issues, but the Roma Opening did not meet the expectations:

“Until 2009, we were called the “esmer vatandaş (dark citizens) or other names, now people talk about the Roma question. Electing Özcan Purçu and Cemal Bekle as MPs have revealed the Roma reality. However, we do not see serious steps taken that are reflected on the Roma. The Roma Opening did not provide a solid improvement for the community.”

⁸¹http://www.sp.gov.tr/tr/temel-belge/s/167/Roman+Vatandaslara+Yonelik+Strateji+Belgesi+_2016-2021 (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸²<http://www.errc.org/news/the-turkish-roma-inclusion-strategy-falls-way-short-of-a-strategy> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸³https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30304/1/4594_Oprisan.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

9. RELATIONSHIP TO THE SECURITY FORCES AND POLICE

Roma in Turkey prefer to live in the community, isolated from other communities as well as the state authority as they face discrimination, humiliation, and abuse every time they interact with them. They prefer to solve their problems on their own rather than requesting help from the security services. As discussed in the literature, invisibility can be a result of social exclusion as well as a survival mechanism for the Roma.⁸⁴ Laura Hammond defines invisibility as “a particular brand of marginalization that effectively removes people from the gaze of the public”.⁸⁵ Until the Roma Opening, the Roma were not visible through their issues and socio-economic status but rather with their “artistic, happy and joyful characters”.

Roma were tolerated by society rather than being socially included and accepted. The limits of toleration and the sharp borders of social inclusion push the Roma to hide behind the public “joyful character” and separate other aspects of their lives and characters from society. Most of the interviewees said that Roma prefer the invisibility mechanism to cope with state institutions, especially with the security officials due to their past experiences.

Elmas Köçkün said that the security officials, including the police, usually perceive Roma people with stereotypes, as people who loot places and move in there, who hurt the people around, and therefore not very sensitive to their problems.

“They do not have healthy communication, so the Roma people reach out to the Roma MPs as the mediator between them. These issues are avoided with temporary band-aid solutions.”

According to Olgun Çaylı, security forces and the police perceive the Roma as a security issue, and if they build a close relationship with the Roma, it does not aim to help the community but rather to collect intelligence:

“If you are a Roma, you cannot be right, you must have done something wrong, that’s how the police officers see it. And this is systematic violence.”

Olgun Çaylı wanted to launch a project with the police officials, make sessions with the young Roma and explain to them the dangers and damages that drugs can cause. He applied to the authorities and was rejected with the excuse that those sessions could promote drugs. Later on, the Ministry of Family and Social Services launched a similar project. He was disappointed with the lack of trust in his project, felt discriminated and complained that they copied his project.

Nurcan Purçu said that they face discrimination from the security officials in every occasion, even when sitting at a park:

“We were sitting at a park with friends, then musicians came over and a balloon seller joined us. We started to make music. But there was another group of people playing music as well. The police officers came over and checked our criminal records, then asked us to stop playing. We turned off the music but the group behind us, who were not Roma, continued to play music.”

⁸⁴https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30304/1/4594_Oprisan.pdf (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸⁵L. Hammond, ‘Strategies of Invisibilization: How Ethiopia’s Resettlement Programme Hides the Poorest of the Poor’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(4), December 2008, pp. 517-536.

The suspicious death of Caner Sarmaşık was a breaking point for the relationship between the Roma and the military forces. Caner Sarmaşık, a 20-year-old Rom, joined the army for his mandatory military services, was sent to Syria, and reported dead during his service. His death was controversial as the Ministry of National Defence declared the cause of death as suicide, but there were rumors that he died of murder due to discrimination⁸⁶. While the Ministry of Defense stated that Caner Sarmaşık committed suicide with another soldier's weapon, the Ministry's report declared that Sarmaşık committed suicide with his commander's weapon.⁸⁷

His brother in law claimed that Sarmaşık called him before he was sent to Syria, saying that he was not doing well and he wanted to be relocated. His brother-in-law also claimed that the commander called Sarmaşık 'Gypsy', and when Sarmaşık asked the commander not to call him by that term, his response was that Sarmaşık "should not speak, he only knows how to play the drum".⁸⁸ The family claimed that although in the autopsy report stated that Sarmaşık's head and chest were cut and analyzed, they have not seen these cuts on Sarmaşık's body.

Özcan Purçu, a Romani MP, highlighted the controversies in the death report and called on the authorities to shed a light on it. Yücel Tural said that even if Caner Sarmaşık committed suicide, the authorities need to look into the reasons for his suicide, especially whether there was discrimination against him.

Elmas Köçkün said that while Roma in Turkey are very nationalist, and never resist the state, the Caner Sarmaşık incident marked a breaking point in the community:

"Most Roma serve in the military; it is very rare for Roma to avoid mandatory military service. But they were very offended [by the Caner Sarmaşık incident], saying that they saw the real face of the state, that they sacrifice their children to the state, but the state discriminates against them. I heard some people saying that they were treated like step-children. It was a breaking point in their perceptions of the state."

Orhan Tanyel also said that Caner Sarmaşık's death impacted the Roma community deeply:

"[Roma] people turned into a fireball. What I have observed in this incident was that Roma people around Turkey could unite. If the Roma continued to be underestimated and ignored, one day the whole community can turn into a fireball, all the negative situations can bottle up and explode like a bomb."

According to Olgun Çaylı, false news and information about Caner Sarmaşık's death led to protests. Olgun Çaylı also said that the Roma face all kinds of discrimination during their military service, they are not trusted, or they are given low skilled duties. In addition, he said that Caner Sarmaşık's death reminded the Roma that they are not a primary component of the Turkish society:

"Turks are different, Roma are different. But Roma devoted themselves to the Turkish nation. They see themselves as Turks. And this reminded us that we are imperfect citizens of the state. We are not treated as full members and loyal citizens of the nation. The Roma are most afraid of standing against the state. That's why during the protests Roma chanted –How happy is the one who says I am a Turk, martyrs are immortal our land is indivisible."

⁸⁶<https://medyascope.tv/2021/05/05/er-caner-sarmasikin-supheli-olumu-uzerine-iddialar-eger-olay-gercekten-intiharsa-bile-ayrimcilik-sonucu-oldugu-gorulmeli/> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸⁷<https://halktv.com.tr/gundem/er-caner-sarmasikin-olumune-dair-detaylar-ortaya-cikti-intihar-deniliyor-ama-sila-456750h> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

⁸⁸<https://halktv.com.tr/gundem/er-caner-sarmasikin-olumune-dair-detaylar-ortaya-cikti-intihar-deniliyor-ama-sila-456750h> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

Halit Keser was dissatisfied with how the Roma civil society dealt with Caner Sarmaşık's death. According to Halit Keser, Caner Sarmaşık's death was not addressed properly by the civil society because of the politicization of the Roma movement:

"None of the Roma associations staked claims related to Caner Sarmaşık's death. There was a systematic marginalization, it is a huge deal, but nobody addressed it, nobody could address it. I expected Özcan Purçu to follow up and address it, but he didn't. You have to file criminal charges, deepen the investigation. Özcan Purçu was the one to do it, and he didn't."

10. ACCESS TO LEGAL RIGHTS

The Roma in Turkey always face obstacles when they are accessing their rights, including accessing their legal rights. Because of the coping mechanism of invisibility, the Roma usually avoid confronting local or national authorities, the security forces, and the police. However, due to the increasing crime rates in Roma neighborhoods and the increasing number of detained or convicted Roma, they create new coping mechanisms for crime-related confrontations. As Olgun Çaylı explained, the Roma are well aware of the legal system, as many of them have been charged with heavy penalties for small crimes.

“We know the court system and the prisons by heart. Nobody hires a lawyer appointed by the state because they don’t do their job well. So, we hire a private lawyer.”

Eren Çekiç was content to see the Human Rights Commission at the İzmir Bar Associations to document the Roma rights violations. On 17 June 2020, the Municipality dismantled the tents and barracks of the Roma in İzmir’s Çeşme district. The İzmir Bar Associations intervened, prepared a report about the violations, and declared the move as an “open human rights violation”.⁸⁹

“If the İzmir Bar Association was not involved in the Çeşme incident, we could not have proven our rightfulness,” Eren Çekiç said.

While the Roma are eager to hire a lawyer and defend their rights in the defendant’s stance, they are not so eager to protect or defend their rights in cases of discrimination and violations. Yücel Tatal said that after the İznik lynching, it took them nearly a year to convince the victims to report the suspects.

“Even when their rights are violated, they avoid going to the police station or the courts. They only go to these places if they do not have another choice,” Yücel Tatal said.

Many families become more precarious due to the high rates of convicting or detaining the Roma. When the breadwinner of the family is behind bars, the woman and the children in the family start working to make a living. In some cases, both parents end up in prison and the children are left to the care of their extended family or taken by the social services. There is no data available about the detained or convicted Roma as the collection of ethnically-disaggregated data is forbidden.

⁸⁹<https://www.izmirbarosu.org.tr/HaberDetay/2078/cesmede-roman-yurttaslarimiza-yonelik-mudahale-acik-bir-insan-haklari-ihlalidir> (Retrieved November 14, 2021).

11. CONCLUSION

This research reveals the living conditions, the political context, and the lack of accessibility to the fundamental rights of the Roma in Turkey. The research explains the issues under the chapters of discrimination, access to housing, education, employment, health services, legal rights, and the Roma mobilization and representation and their relationship with the security forces through the intersectional elements of discrimination, gender, children rights, and the pandemic.

As this research indicates, the Roma in Turkey are facing the most severe forms of poverty and social exclusion and their socio-economic status manifest itself in living in advanced marginality. They are socially segregated from society both as a result of the discrimination and as a coping mechanism, they prefer living in Roma neighborhoods or mixed neighborhoods with other disadvantaged communities. Forced evictions due to urban transformation plans are becoming more common in Roma neighborhoods. Roma children increasingly face obstacles in accessing education due to the pandemic, as many of them did not have the necessary electronic devices or the internet to access online education.

Although most of the interviewees argued that discrimination during the hiring process or employment is decreasing with the efforts of the Roma civil society, it is still an issue for the young Roma. They are discriminated against based on their addresses, accents, skin colors, or clothes. In addition, the high unemployment rates of the university graduate Roma reinforce the traditional disbelief that education does not provide economic stability. The unemployment of the university graduate Roma impacts the Roma children negatively.

As the traditional jobs are disappearing, Roma are more involved in the street economy and daily jobs; and many of them continue to work unregistered and without any social security. There is a significant increase in accessing health services due to the widely available family doctor and health center system. However, while accessing more specific treatments such as operations or regular chronic illness treatments, Roma still face discrimination.

In rare cases, Roma women are discriminated against while accessing gynecology and obstetrics services. Since most of the Roma work unregistered, they benefit from the Green Card system and access the health services for free. Due to low income, and especially because of the pandemic and the worsening economy, most of the Roma apply for social aid. During the pandemic, some families were left without any income, and for some of them, social aids became the main source of living for the family.

The Roma mobilization, which had grown rapidly since the beginning of the 2000s, has been deeply affected by domestic politics, lost its pace throughout the years, and turned into a polarized and partisan movement. Although the election of two Roma MPs was welcomed with excitement in the Roma community, the civil society was unable to distance itself from politics and lost its position as a separate power in the community.

The Roma Opening Process and the Roma Strategy Document and Action Plans did not lead to any solid, practical change in terms of social inclusion. The Roma community was dissatisfied with the results of the Roma Opening Process and their expectations were not met in practice. The Roma continue to have problems while communicating with the security forces due to stereotyping by the officials, especially in drug crime related issues. Due to the lack of trust in the security forces, the Roma underreport the crimes that are committed to them, they prefer to be invisible rather than applying to the authorities.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 Recommendations against discrimination:

1. Authorities should ensure that discrimination and discriminatory practices are combated through adequate national legislation, particularly in the fields of employment, housing, and education. The legislation should render illegal any discrimination on the part of the public authorities in the exercise of their duties.
2. Authorities should ensure that the anti-discrimination legislation to include the name used officially for the various Romani/Gypsy communities which the community in question wishes to be known.
3. The implementation of the legislation on anti-discrimination should be improved and pro-active steps should be taken to promote the legislation among the Romani community.
4. Institutional arrangements should be developed to promote an active role and participation of Romani/Gypsy communities in the decision-making process, through national, regional and local consultative mechanisms, with priority placed on the idea of partnership on an equal footing.
5. The discrimination faced by the Roma should be addressed by politicians, media, and civil society actors to raise awareness in the society.
6. In discrimination claims, the burden of proof should be on the suspect and perpetrator.
7. The authorities should develop statistical data and a set of indicators, with strict respect to the principles of confidentiality and voluntary self-identification, to evaluate and improve the integration and living conditions of the beneficiaries of integration policies in core areas such as education, employment, health and housing.
8. Social inclusion programs such as SIROMA should be organized within the Roma community as well as in other communities, especially in other disadvantaged communities such as Kurds and Syrians.
9. Minister of Family and Social Services should include inter-racial marriages and issues arising from inter-racial marriages in their marriage education programs and should provide consultancy to the people and their families involved in inter-racial marriages.
10. Social campaigns should be organized to break the 'Gypsy' and anti-Roma stereotypes in society.
11. Officials and political leaders at all levels should stop using hate speech and the government should adopt codes of conduct to prohibit hate speech. These codes of conduct should provide mechanisms for complaints and adequate sanctions for breach of the codes.

12.2 Recommendations for access to housing:

1. Safe and proper housing should be made available to the Romani communities without interrupting or undermining their culture.
2. The urban transformation plans for the Roma neighborhoods should be designed as inclusive and fair. The plans should include the Roma in the future of the neighborhoods and should not force the Roma population out of the district. Their properties should be calculated fairly and they should receive the full compensation on time. The authorities should initiate open and trustworthy communication with the Roma during and after the urban transformation projects.
3. In case of providing the Roma apartments as compensation during gentrification, the monthly payments and expenses should be arranged by their income.
4. The infrastructure of the Roma neighborhoods should be fixed and developed.
5. Although the Sulukule, once the most significant and historical Roma residence in Turkey, is completely demolished, gentrified, and filled with new buildings, the local and national authorities should make safe spaces for the Roma to connect with their past and culture in the area.
6. Psychological support should be provided for families who were forcibly evicted from their neighborhoods for their integration into the new neighborhoods.

7. Special projects should be implemented for semi-nomadic and nomadic Gypsy, Roma, and Dom families for their children to continue to their studies.
8. The security officials and the police who are working in Roma neighborhoods should be trained about discrimination and potential lynching attempts, they should coordinate a system with local authorities to prevent or stop any such collective attacks or discriminative acts. They should also be trained about dealing with traumatic victims of such attacks and people with PTSD.

12.3 Recommendations for access to education:

1. Projects for the education of the Roma and the Dom children should include teachers, school management, parents, and role models from the community. Especially the families of the children should be trained and educated about their roles in the education process.
2. Roma schools should be determined and turned into more inclusive schools for children. The infrastructure, physical, and digital capacity of the Roma schools should be fixed and developed and these schools should turn into more attractive places for children.
3. For the Roma and Dom families in deep poverty, the authorities should cover all expenses related to the children's education, including breakfast, lunch, transportation, clothes, uniform, and all other materials required for the school.
4. The system of appointing low-scored teachers to Roma schools should be discussed seriously by the authorities and this procedure should be changed. If needed, the Roma schools should turn into more attractive places for the teachers.
5. All the people working at schools, including the managers, the teachers and the personnel, should be trained about the Roma and the Dom culture, anti-discrimination legislation, and inclusiveness.
6. Discrimination from peers should be treated with seriousness, all necessary measurements and training should be available in schools.
7. The Roma and Dom children should be supported with study groups, with help from role models from Romani and non-Romani communities.
8. All digital devices and internet access should be made available to the Roma and Dom students.
9. Early marriages should be considered as a political and social issue and all necessary steps should be taken to prevent them. Special consultancy and health services should be made available for people who have married early, especially the girls.
10. For education projects like SIROMA, the critics from the community should be received and the projects should be assessed in the light of these critics.
11. The Roma and Dom students who dropped out of school during the pandemic should be encouraged to go back to their studies. The increase in child labor during the pandemic should be addressed and authorities should create new solutions for the child labor issue.

12.4 Recommendations for access to employment and health:

1. Authorities should implement positive discrimination for the university graduate Roma to set role models for the Roma children.
2. Disappearing traditional jobs of the Roma and the Dom should be promoted and revived.
3. New policies should be implemented to improve the working conditions of seasonal agriculture workers. Social security services should be made available to the seasonal, street, or daily workers for free or with low payments.
4. The requirements to access social aid should be simpler and shaped under the living conditions of the Roma and the Dom. Lack of documents, domestic violence, illiteracy are the prior elements to be considered while the Roma and the Dom are applying for social aid.
5. Drug trade or abuse related to unemployment should be addressed and new policies should be implemented to combat drug-related issues.
6. Social inclusion projects and consultancy should be available for drug abusers.

7. A new policy or quotas should be implemented for the employment of the Roma and the Dom who are in deep poverty.
8. Health workers, doctors, and hospital management should be trained about anti-discrimination legislation and social inclusiveness. Reports related to discrimination while accessing health services should be considered seriously. Authorities should impose sanctions on those who are committing the crime of discrimination.

12.5 Recommendations to the civil society and the politicians:

1. The Roma Opening Process should continue with the participation of all actors in the Roma community. The Process should be assessed and transformed by the critics arising from the community. The commitments mentioned in the Roma Strategy Document should be implemented regularly.
2. The Roma MPs should consider the criticism coming from the Roma community and avoid partisanship in their work.
3. The Roma civil society should determine the mutual issues and unite around the solutions for these problems, share their experiences and coping mechanisms with each other.
4. The Roma civil society leaders should stay distance themselves from politics and avoid any partisanship upon the request of the Roma community.

12.6 Recommendations for the security forces and the police:

1. New policies should be implemented to create healthier dialogue between the security forces and the Romani community.
2. Authorities should establish a system for recording and monitoring all racist and discriminative incidents and ensure a thorough police investigation and prosecution of all such cases.
3. The security forces, the military, and the police should be trained about anti-discrimination legislation and social inclusiveness.
4. Any reports or claims about the security forces, the military, or the police should be investigated transparently.
5. New policies should be implemented to combat the increasing crime rates in Roma neighborhoods.

12.7 Recommendations for accessing legal rights:

1. New policies should be implemented to encourage the Roma to report crimes and violations.
2. All legal actors, including the lawyers, the bar associations, the judges, the prosecutors, and the court personnel, should be trained about social inclusiveness.
3. More Roma organizations should be encouraged to work on accessing legal rights.
4. More research should be conducted about the Roma and their accession to legal rights, the conviction and detention rates of the Roma and the treatment towards the Roma during the legal procedures and trials.

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