
Working with Roma NFPs

Central and Eastern European (CEE) Gypsies from countries such as Romania, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Serbia are known as Roma. They claim the same Northern Indian origins as English Romany Gypsies and their settlement in these regions dates back hundreds of years. There is an estimated Roma population of 12-15 million in Europe, with the majority living Eastern Europe. This makes them the largest European minority ethnic group in Europe.

In terms of cultural identity and experiences of extreme exclusion, there is much overlap between the experiences of Roma from Eastern Europe and Gypsies and Travellers, not least the importance of family and the historic importance of travelling. Successive and violent assimilationist policies, however, have meant that Roma no longer follow a nomadic way of life in these countries.

Diversity - Languages and Religions

It is very important to underline the linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of Roma communities and the need to move away from the idea of a single homogenous Roma community. In general, members of Roma communities will speak the national language of the country they come from as well as their own language, known as Romany. The Romany spoken by Roma in CEE countries shares the same North Indian linguistic roots as that spoken by English Gypsies; however, over the passage of time it has mixed with other languages and changed considerably. The result is that while certain nouns and verbs may be common or similar, dialects spoken are often not mutually intelligible. Romanian Roma may understand Romany spoken by Czech, Slovak and Balkan Roma; they will have difficulty with Polish Roma which has less similarities. As Roma spend more time in the UK, young people are losing national languages like Polish and Romanian in favour of English and Romany.

Religious allegiances tend to correspond with the main faiths practised in the country of origin for instance, Polish Roma are generally Roman Catholic, while there is more diversity in Romania with religious beliefs divided between the Eastern Orthodox church, Catholicism, Islam and, increasingly since the regime change, Evangelical Christianity, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon churches (Ureche, 2006:12).

Dress

A cultural emphasis on modesty for women means that married women wear traditional long dresses and aprons. Dress codes are less strict for younger women but once they get engaged they generally adopt a more traditional dress. Girls sometimes get engaged at the age of 14 or 15 (Ureche, 2005:45). Attitudes to dress vary according to national and cultural backgrounds.

Exclusion and Discrimination

Roma communities have faced state led discrimination and prejudice in CEE countries for hundreds of years. This has included being subjected to policies of forced settlement, having their language outlawed, forced sterilisation and being systemically targeted and killed in Nazi death camps during the Second World War. Since the early 1990s, the multiple exclusions and discriminations experience by Roma in work, education, housing, service access and justice have been increasingly documented by European Institutions. This unprecedented interest in Roma exclusion has meant a corresponding increase in Roma political activity and focus on culture and identity. This has had little impact, however, on the extremely poor socioeconomic conditions that the majority of Roma experience in CEE countries. In 2005, a decade of Roma Inclusion was launched across eight CEE countries, with the support of governments, to address discrimination and exclusion in education, employment, health and housing.

Trafficking

Roma are over-represented as victims of trafficking, particularly children and women who may lack documentation or be seen as easier to control due to the paternalistic nature of Roma culture. However, the activities for which they are trafficked often are not immediately recognised as they do not fit common perceptions of trafficking. They may include but are not limited to forced begging and forced participation in pickpocketing and theft. Victims of this kind of trafficking may be instead identified as victims of domestic violence as the traffickers may be family members. For more information see Trafficking [link to Trafficking section].

Roma in the UK

The shift from socialist regimes in CEE countries has had a devastating effect on the living conditions of Roma throughout the region, as previous state measures to provide work, education and housing for everyone were abandoned. During the transition period, Roma started arriving in the UK in search of asylum in the wake of multiple-level exclusions and segregation as well as systematic human rights abuses in their home countries. In 2004, when many CEE countries joined the European Union, many Roma who arrived prior to 2004 and registered as asylum seekers

were able to regularise their status in the UK. Restrictions in place on the rights of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens from their accession to the European Union in 2007 up until the end of 2013 made it very difficult for Roma from those countries who came to the UK to settle effectively. Also, for reasons of language and culture, many Roma find themselves very socially isolated in this country. This can be especially true for women who stay at home to mind the children and the house while the men go out in search of work. Apart from going to school, parents will seldom allow their children to mix with non-Roma children.

A 2010 article by the Runnymede Trust noted significant Roma settlement particularly in the North of England, East Midlands, Kent and north and east London. Also there were significant communities in Glasgow, Cardiff and in Belfast (Fremlova & Anstead, 2010).

Challenges in the UK

Employment

One of the single biggest challenges faced by Roma in the UK is accessing work, which may also be the key to their UK residency, social participation and upward mobility. A lack of educational achievement, or even participation, poor literacy and language skills and a lack of recognised other skills underpin the difficulties in gaining employment. In the voluntary sector there is also very little cultural awareness and understanding of Roma needs. Moreover, there is practically no recognition of the barriers they experience in trying to access work and consequently no assistance in terms of language or specialist training. For many survival depends on begging and petty criminality.

Language and Literacy

Lack of English and poor literacy skills in their own languages compound the barriers Roma face in getting work, accessing services and participation in this country. Romany is the main language used by Roma but they will also speak the national language from their country of origin. However, because of very poor access to education in these countries many Roma are illiterate in their national languages which is a further barrier to acquiring these skills in English.

Gender

Roma cultures are strongly delineated along gender lines. The man's job is to provide for the family and woman's to look after the domestic space and children. Men, women and children contribute to the well-being of the family unit in different ways. From an early age, boys and girls mixing freely together is culturally prohibited. They often marry and start their own families from a young age. Privacy is seen as an important requirement for these groups, especially women, who are brought up to avoid casual socialising with the opposite sex from an early age. It is important for officers to take this into account when working with female Roma offenders. Given

the strongly patriarchal culture, Roma men are used to dealing with other men and may be more comfortable working with a male officer.

Communication

- Roma culture is orally based and it is therefore important for officers to focus on spoken communication in their relations with Roma offenders. In addition, there should be no presumption that they have developed literacy skills. Face-to-face spoken communication should always be favoured over written.
- Officers should not make presumptions about literacy skills of Roma. A lack of these skills often leads to difficulties in following rules and regulations if they can only be accessed in written format. As a result, and despite the impression of being streetwise and knowing the procedure to follow, Roma may, in fact, have little understanding of criminal justice systems and the type of behaviour that is expected of them.
- Staff should bear in mind that Roma are not socialised into accepting authority that comes from outside their extended families, and so adopting an over the top authoritarian line may lead to an openly hostile relationship. A more informal explanatory approach where there is no presumption on the part of the officer that the person in question knows the ropes, even if this is not his or her first experience of prison, is advised.
- When working with Roma, caution needs to be exercised in the use of interpreters. As in this part of the world for Gypsies and Travellers, in CEE countries there is a long history of animosity between Roma and the rest of society. It is vital to make sure that the interpreter doesn't have preconceived and prejudicial attitudes towards Roma and their culture.
- Also, due to this hostility between Roma and the rest of society, care should be taken not to assume that because two prisoners are from the same country there will be any common understanding or friendliness. Indeed, as noted, if one of the prisoners is from the Roma community and the other is not, there may be actual hostility between them.

Resources

Roma Support Group

PO Box 23610, London E7 0XB

Tel: 020 7511 8245

E-mail roma@supportgroup.freemove.co.uk

www.romasupportgroup.org.uk

Roma Support Group offer a variety of services and promote understanding of Roma culture in the UK.

Equality

Equality is a UK national support organisation that is empowering Roma to resolve employment, housing, education, healthcare and social welfare issues. It works with

Roma and the providers of services to reduce social exclusion, discrimination and exploitation. It also helps service providers adapt their services to better meet the needs of the ethnic minority group.

www.equality.uk.com