



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



Unheard Stories

The Lived Realities of Roma Probationers in
Bulgaria



Content

S

Methodology

Research context

Major themes:

- identity and personal experiences
- gender and intersectionality
- historical memory and migration
- socio-economic challenges
- experiences during the COVID-19 period

- relationships with the probation system
- solutions and hopes
- discrimination and racism
- resilience and support mechanisms
- aspirations and messages for social change

Key insights and recommendations

Study design

- Qualitative approach
- Semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, narrative analysis.



Sampling and participants

- Target group: Roma probationers and family members
- Inclusion criteria – localities – women in probation and interest
- Sampling method: purposive + snowball



Fieldwork in a nutshell

81
interviewees

4 localities:

- Byala Slatina: 20 ppl
- Pleven: 21 ppl
- Plovdiv: 20 ppl
- Sofia: 20 ppl

Purposive
sampling
strategy to
proritise
women

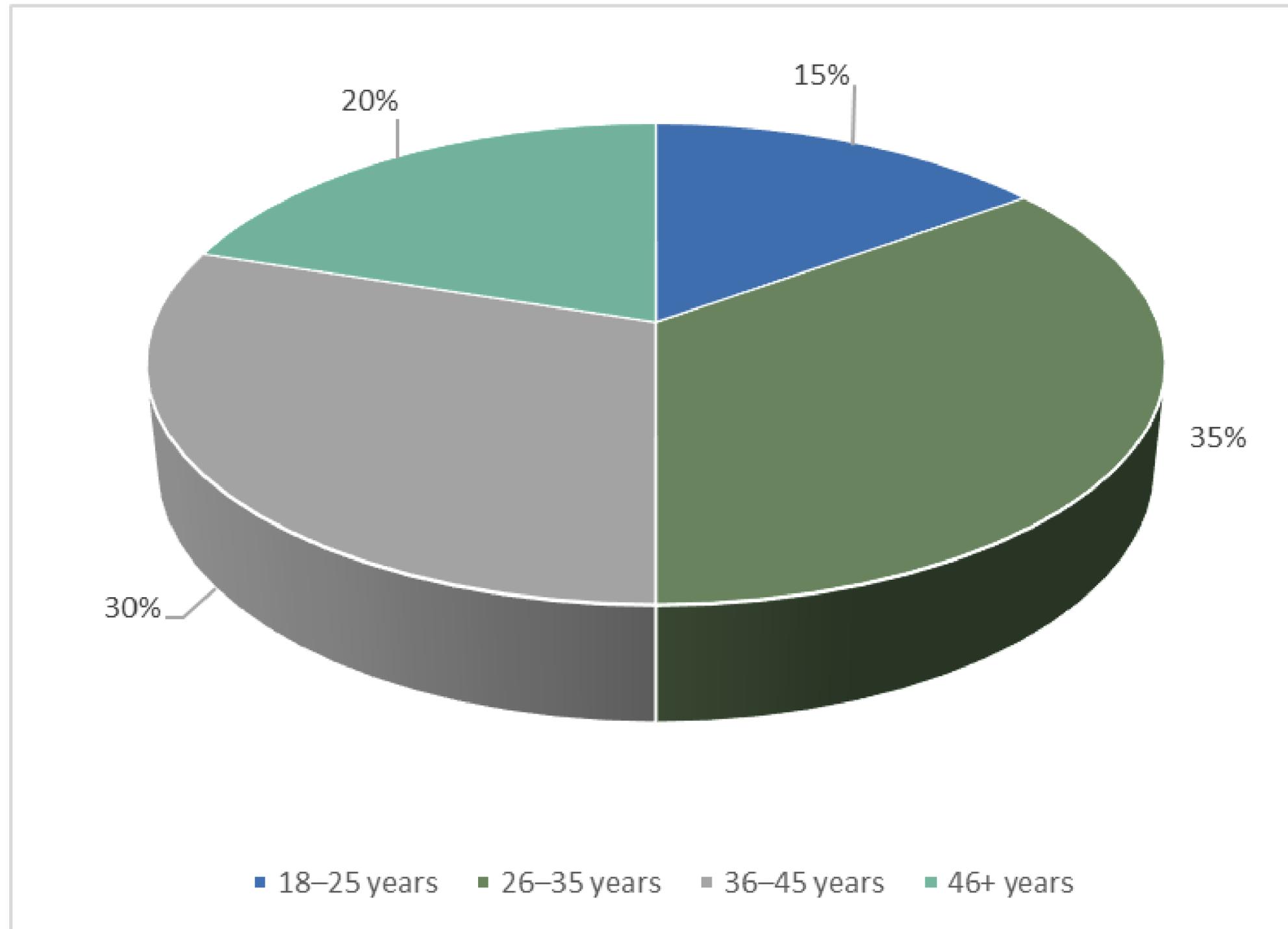
Duration:
45 - 120
minutes

Age range:
19 to 86
years

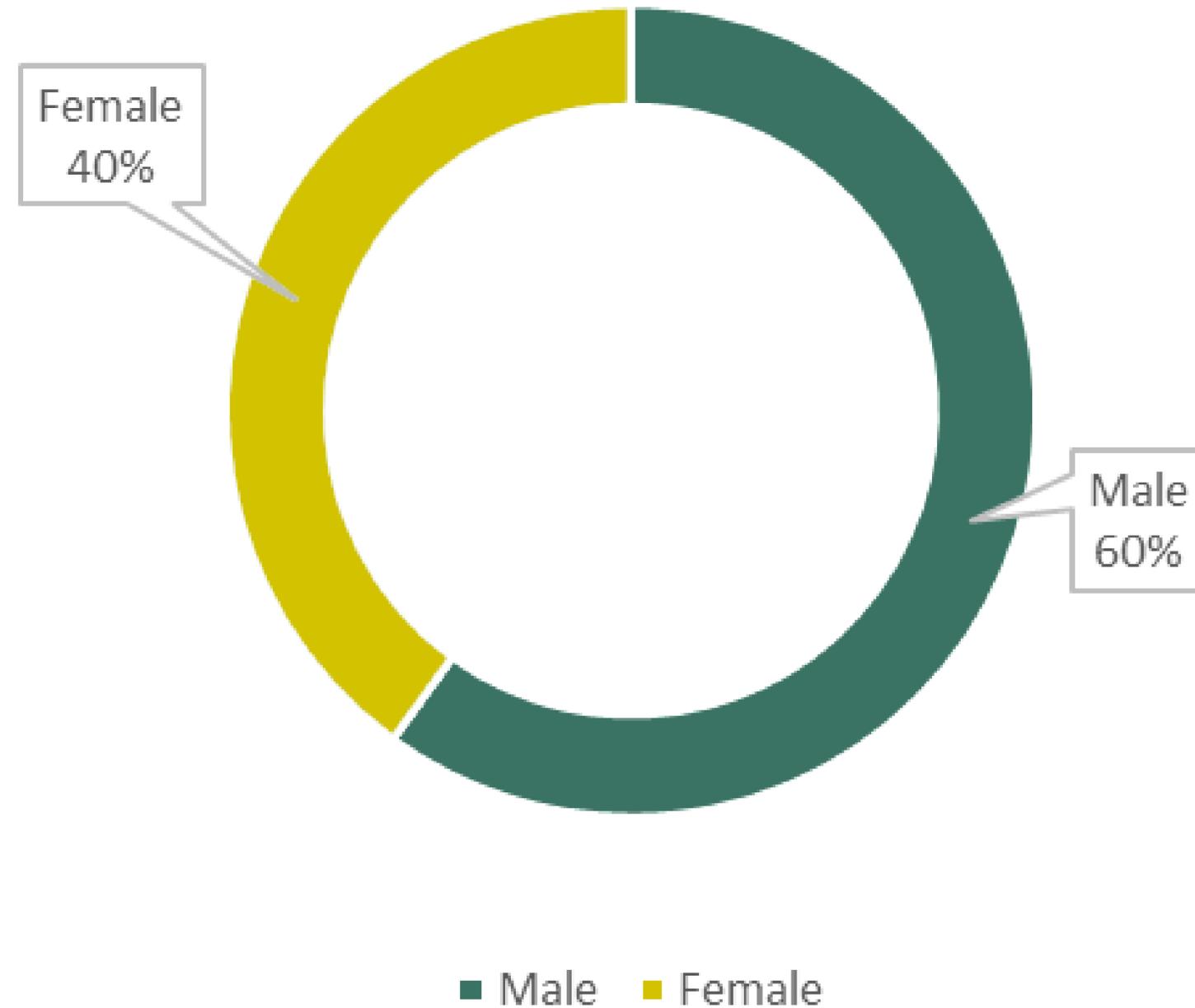
Gender:
32 female
49 male

Between 1 July
and 1 September
2025

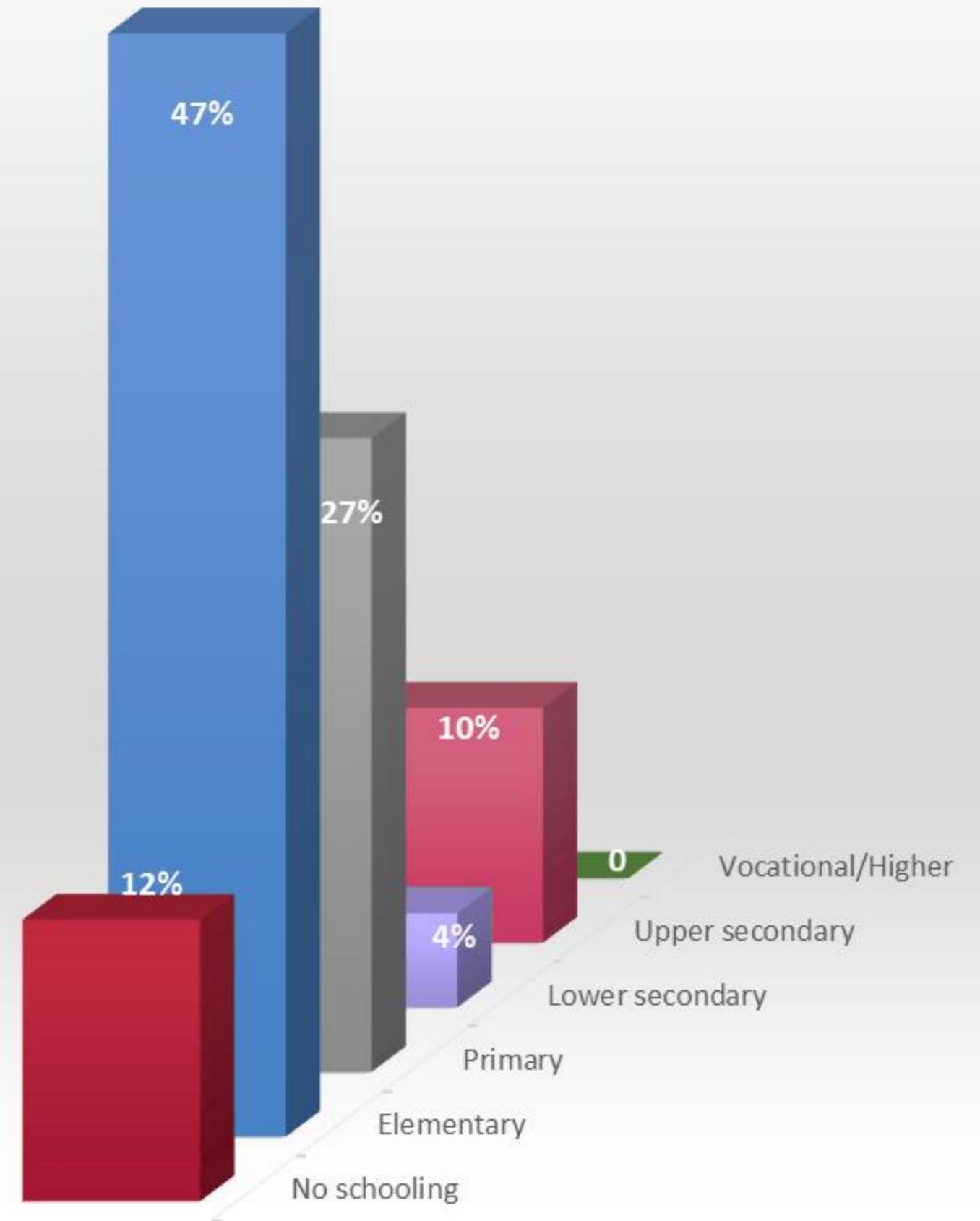
Socio-demographic overview of participants: Age



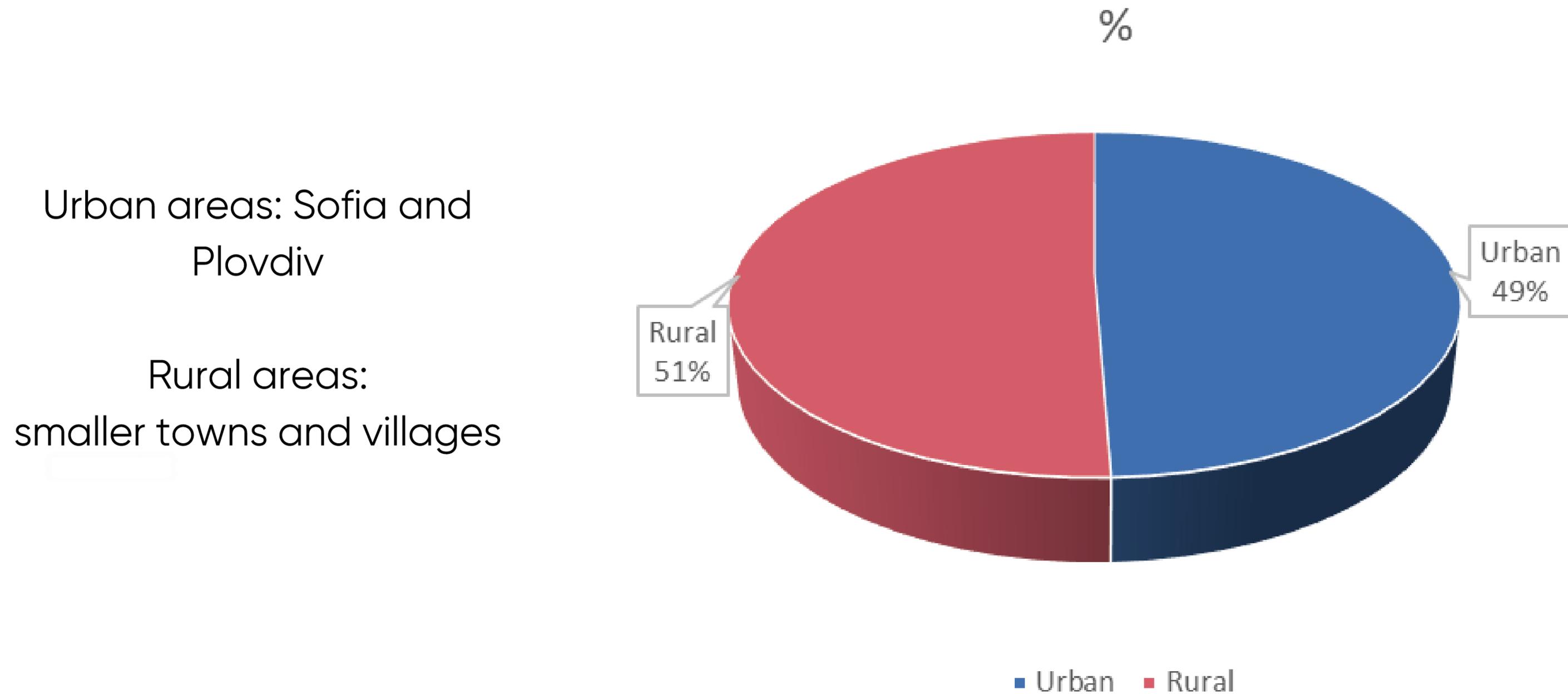
Socio-demographic overview of participants: Gender



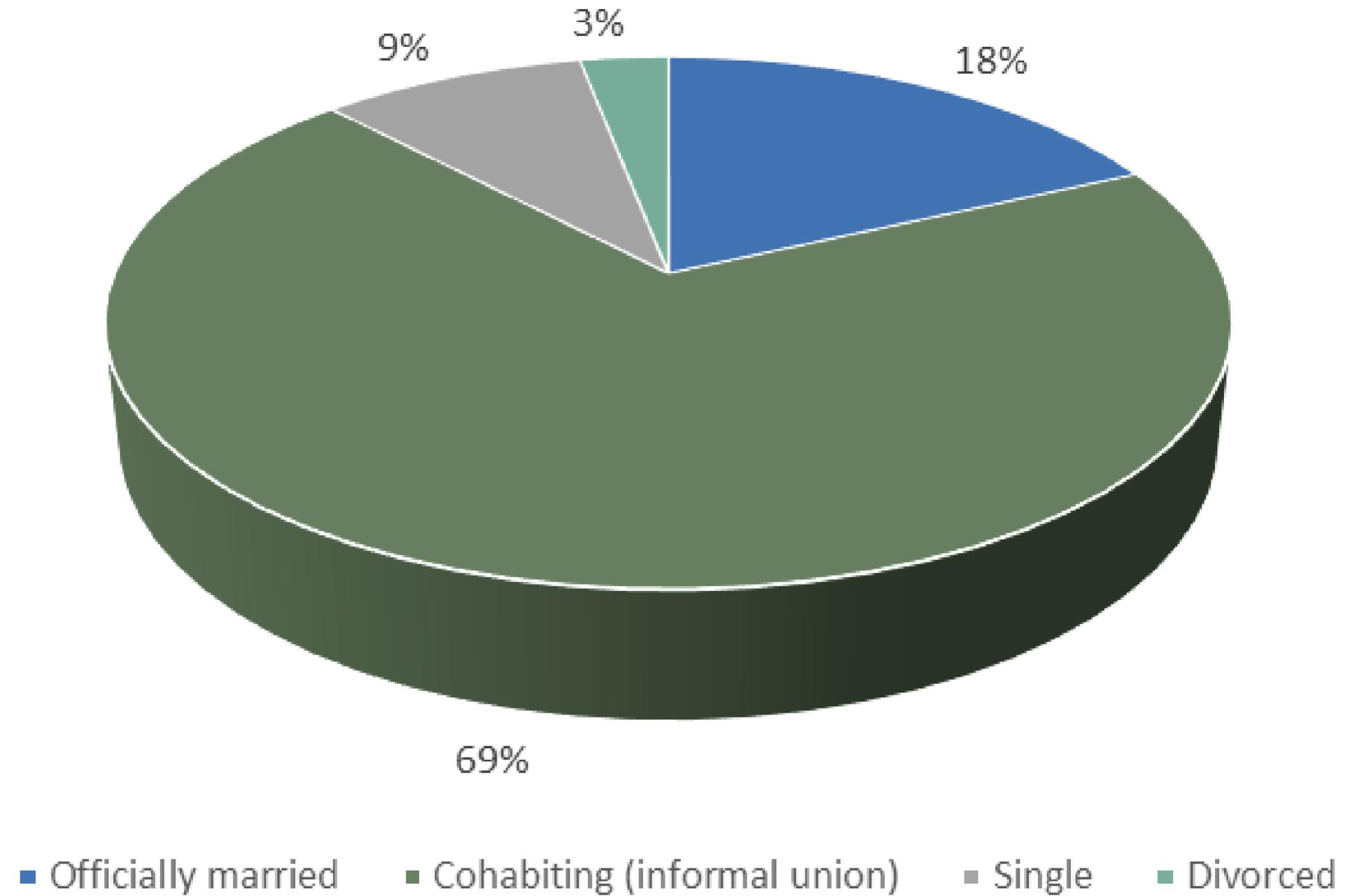
Socio-demographic overview of participants: level of education



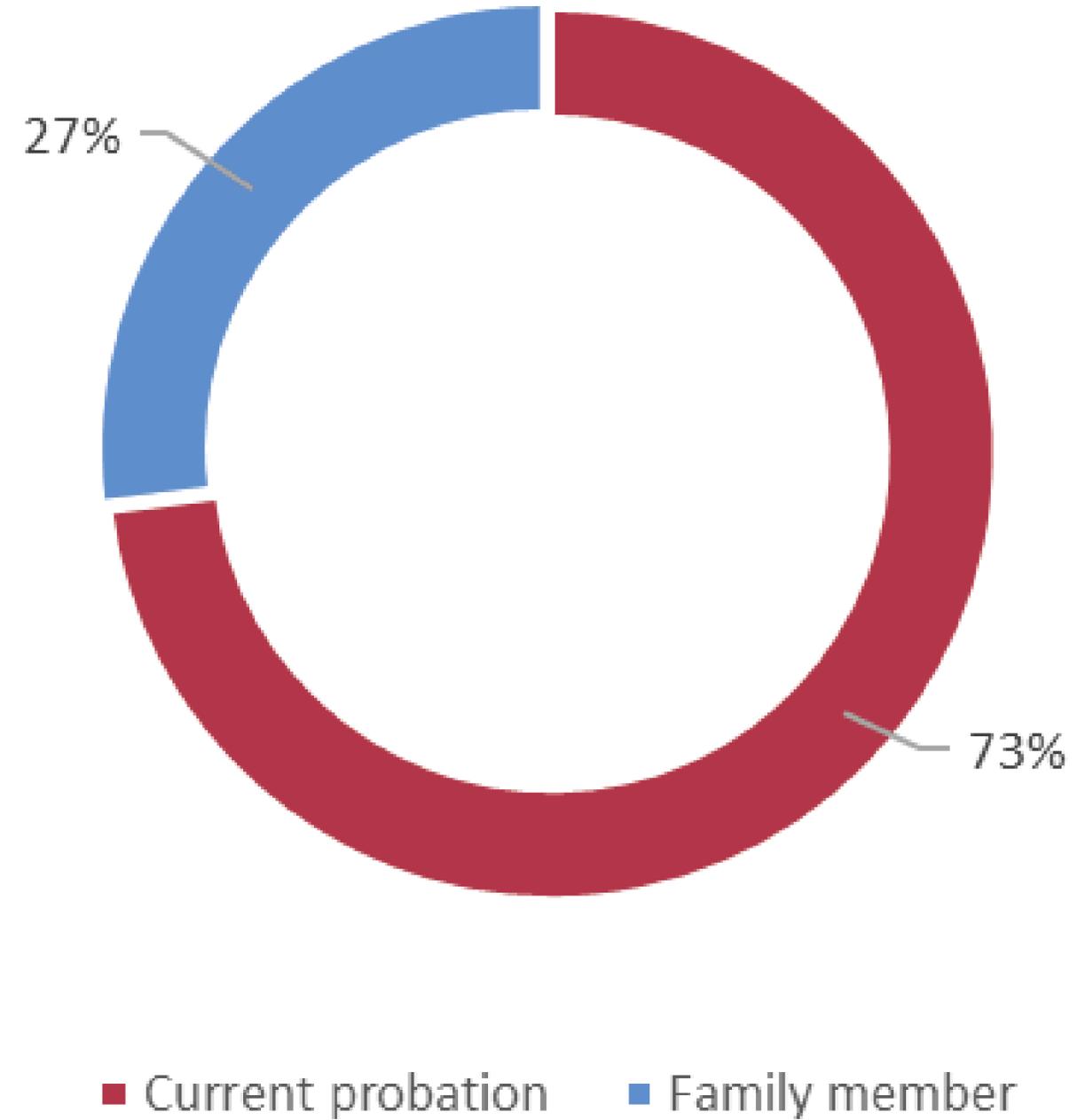
Socio-demographic overview of participants: locality



Socio-
demographic
overview
of participants:
Family status



Socio-
demographic
overview
of participants:
sentence status



Data analysis – thematic analysis

Primary data: 80 interview
transcripts + supporting docs

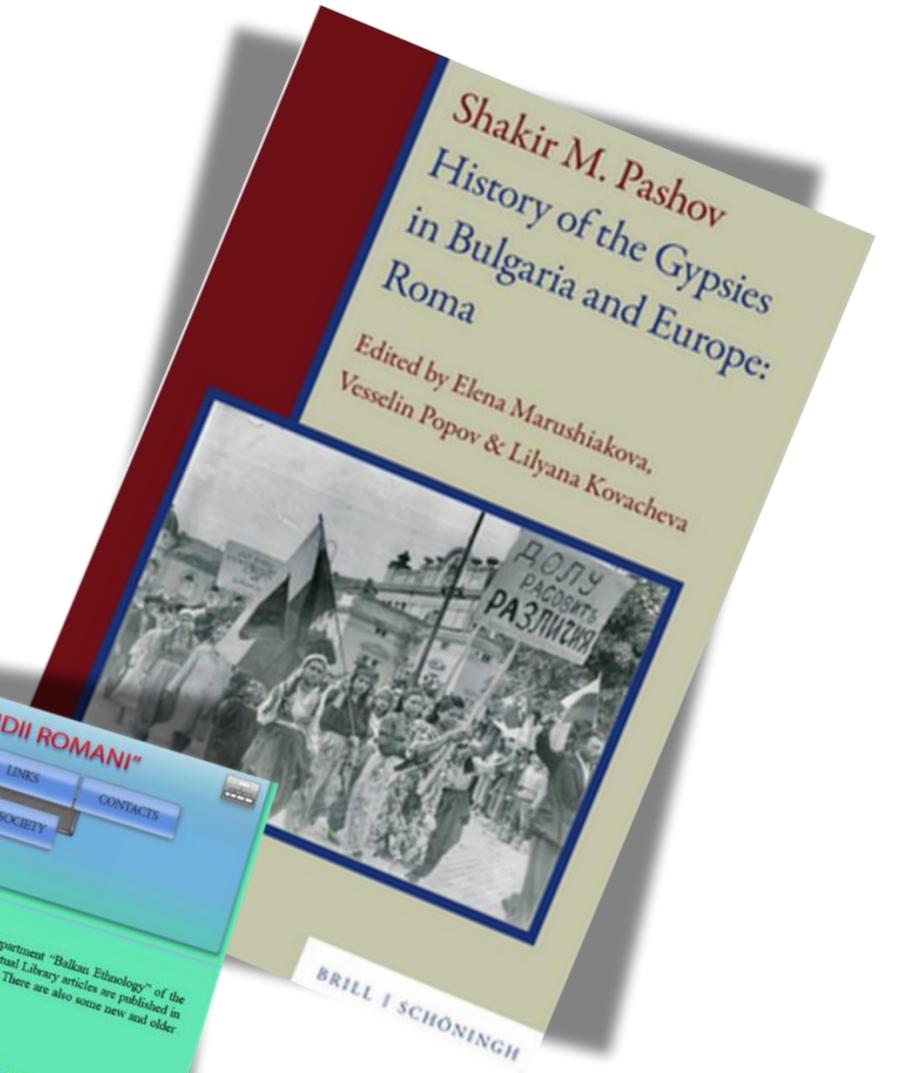
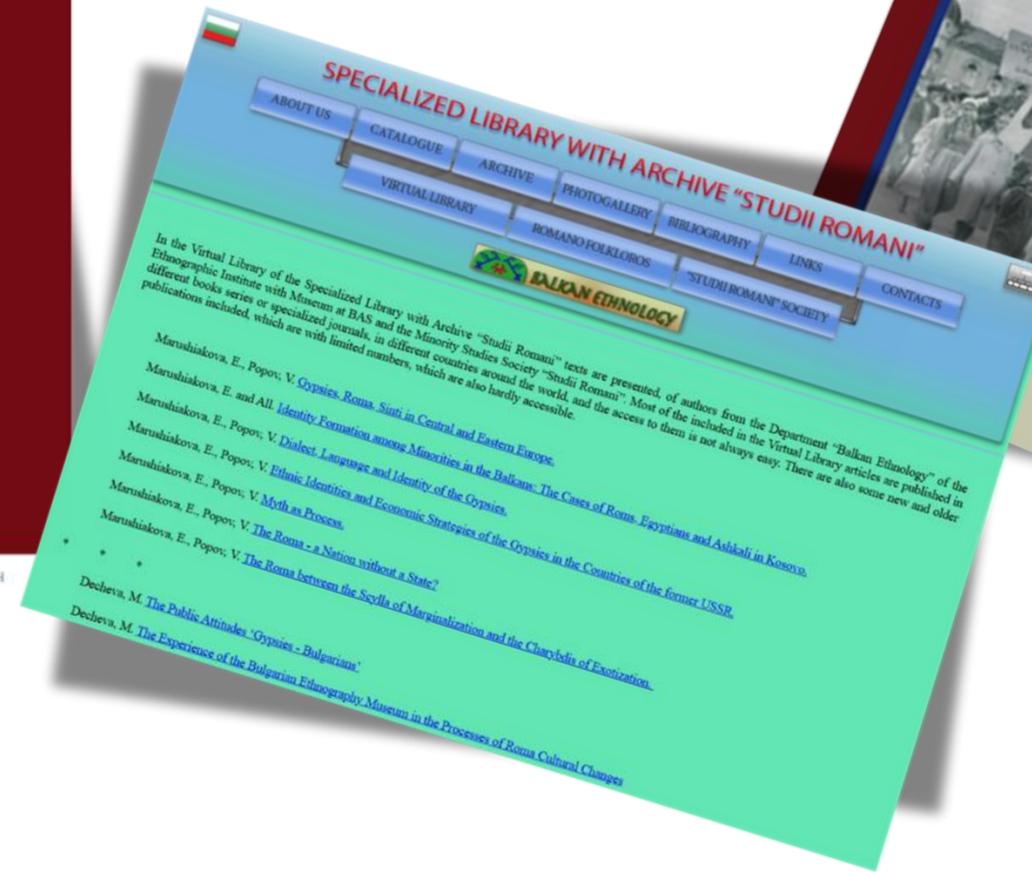
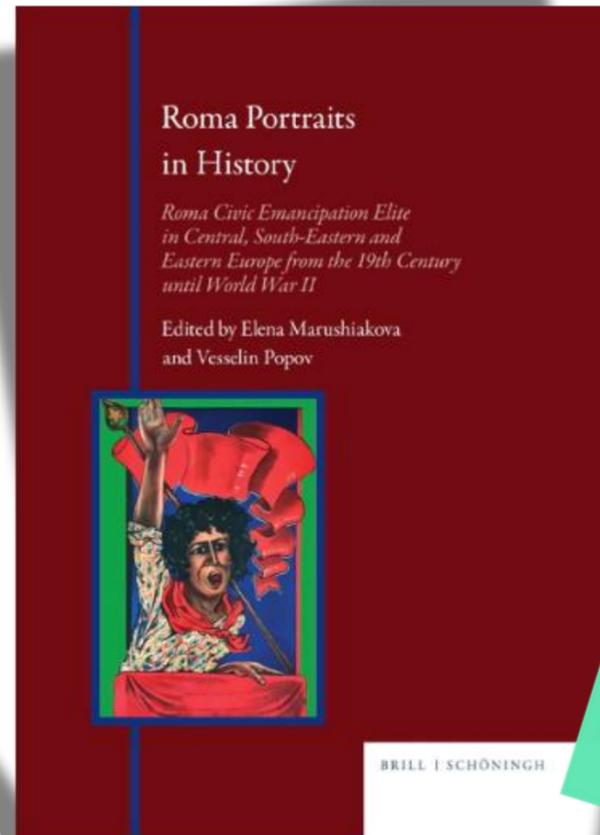
Initial coding and defining
main themes

Grouping
perspectives

Drafting the
report

- Choosing representative interview excerpts for each theme.
- Critical and interpretive analysis of the themes in relation to the research objectives.
- Integrating specialised literature to support interpretations.

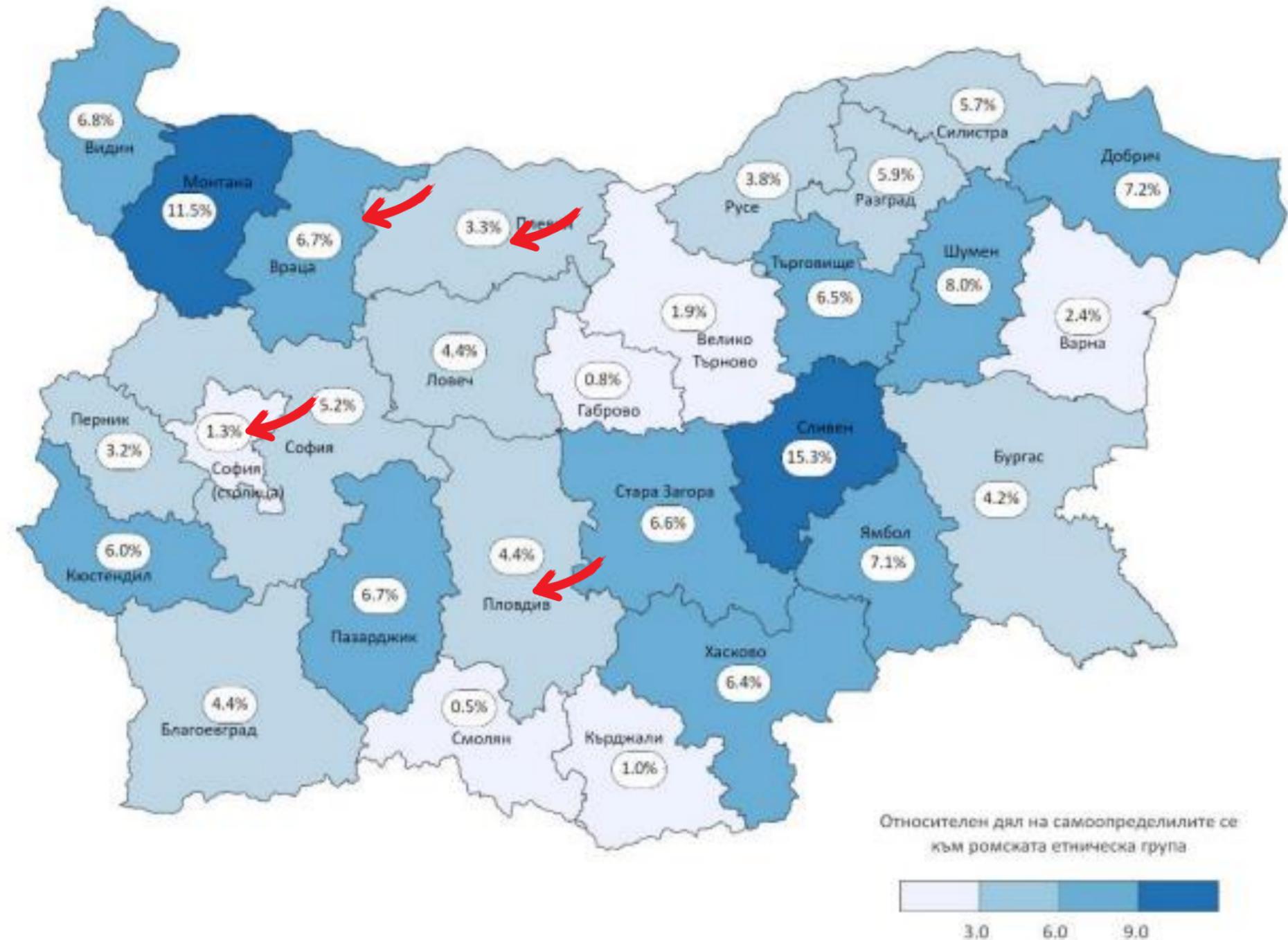
Research context: Roma history and traditions



Research context: What we know about Roma in Bulgaria

Census is the only official source of ethnic data.

A number of estimates exist but are limited either territorially or topically.



Research context: What we know about Roma in Bulgaria



2024 FRA data suggests that:

- 53% of Roma are at risk of poverty in compared to 86% in 2016
- 42% of young Roma have at least lower secondary education compared to 49% in 2016
- 79% of Roma live in overcrowding compared to 34% of the Bulgarian population
- 70% of Roma children go to segregated schools
- 19% of Roma have been discriminated against while only 7% of them reported such incidents

BNSI and FRA's 2022 data suggest that spatial segregation is among the most depriving factors affecting Roma.

Research context: What we know about traditions and gender roles?

A 2014 World Bank study in four communities suggests that there is:

- a **disconnect** between proclaimed values and their practice concerning traditional gender norms;
- a **declining authority of Roma men** inside the family, which is a primary cause for high stress levels inside households and a perceived increase in domestic violence
- **Intra-household** and **inter-generational relationships** are in a state of flux as gender roles continue to evolve.
- Where the pressure of traditional social norms is strong, **boys** are pushed towards being the provider instead of attending school and the significant value attached to the virginity of brides leads parents to pull their **daughters** out of school when they reach puberty



Identity and personal experiences:

How respondents define being Roma

„I am not ashamed of being Roma. Because we care about our loved ones, if we have a loved one in need, we will always... I say this with my hand on my heart – I will take off my clothes and give them to him.“ (BG_SOFIA_15)

“I am telling the truth, there are no Gypsies, there are no Bulgarians, we are all the same. We live in one country, in principle.” (BG_SOFIA_14)

Identity and personal experiences: Ethnic subgroups

"Gypsies" is what you Bulgarians call us. We are all gypsies under one common denominator. However, we gypsies have other things. For example, we have the Leshetari [scavengers], we have the Gypsies, who are, well, they are still us, we are all Gypsies, but we are divided into Gypsies, Leshetari, and Kalaydzhii. So there are three of us. And, for example, the Kalaydzhii – they hate the Leshetari. And the gypsies, they hate the Leshetari, too. [...] The Leshetari live in the ghetto and steal and fight, and they do everything [bad] that happens. But now the gypsies have opened restaurants and shops in the city center, they are in political parties, they are members of parliament, and because of that they are something more than the Leshetari. (BG_BS_11)



Identity and personal experiences: Language and religion

"Yes, especially the language, but we understand each other. They break their tongues a little, we speak it more clearly, and they say that we speak it dirty, they speak it clearly, and we can't agree on that. But we understand each other. There are words we don't understand, but one way or another we understand what it's about. But for the most part, we understand each other. I understand them very well, because I travel constantly, whether for work or something else, I'm always on business trips, I'm used to it now. There was even a period when I started speaking Turkish, because I was working in Razgrad, and most people there are Turkish. And I started speaking Turkish, that kind of thing."

(BG_SOFIA_4)

Gender and intersectionality

- Gender-specific vulnerabilities
- Experiences unique to women:
 - early marriage
 - being bought as a bride
 - living in unstable families



Historical memory and migration

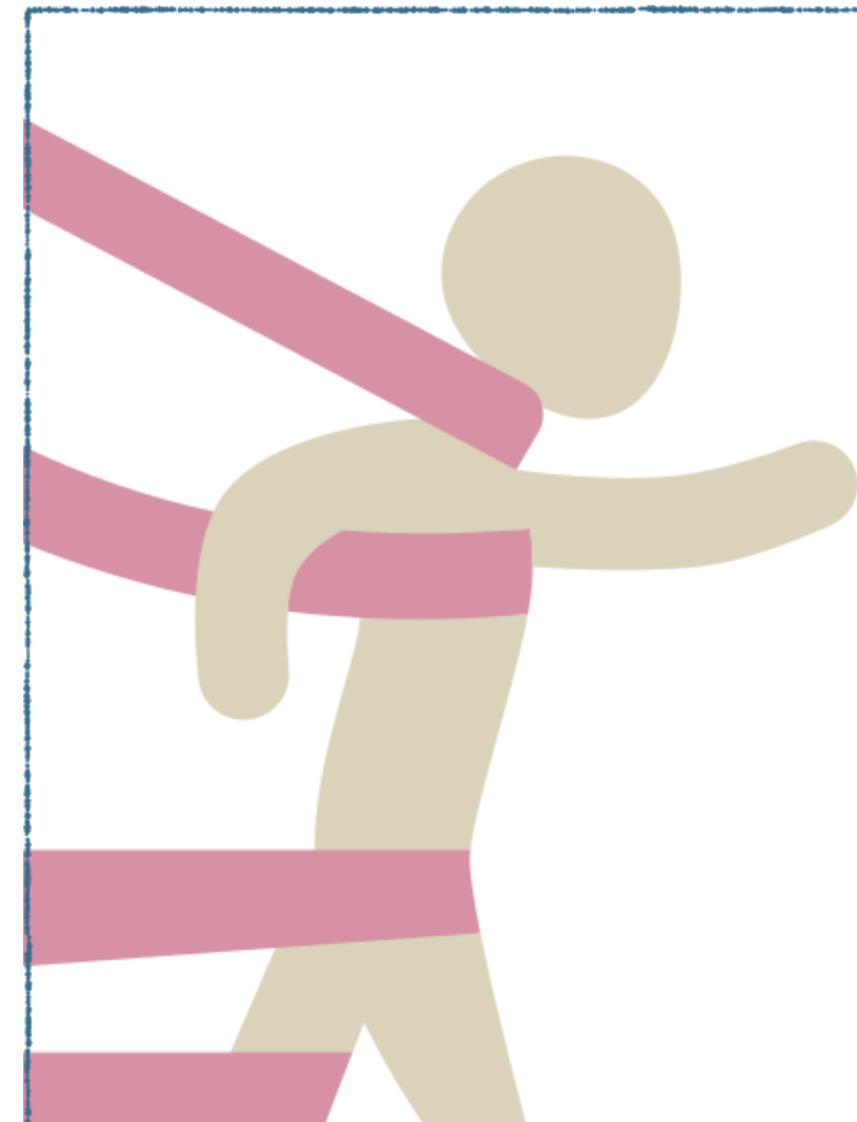
"I associate the name change with unpleasant memories. It was in middle school. I had a very good teacher. Very good. However, my memory of it is unpleasant. Nine times [the teacher said] – "Galin, stand up!" I don't know my name because I know [my name is] Gyulsi. I grew up with that name. They called the police. Our parents from work. That under their control, I didn't want to accept the Bulgarian name and so on. Which wasn't true. And that's why sometimes when I think about it, I hate the name Galin, but I'm used to it."

BG_BS_4



Socio-economic challenges

- Lack employment opportunities
- Lack access to (quality) education
- Lack decent and or affordable housing
- Live in spatial segregation



Experiences during the COVID-19 period

"Because there was a pharmacy in the neighborhood, they closed it down, it was run by an Arab. And he gave me these medicines, but I took them for three days and they just made me feel worse. So I stopped taking them, and after five days I was back on my feet. Almost all of my friends got sick. We didn't lock ourselves inside. Because, to be honest, it was just the flu. And now they were putting them in the hospital, I think most of the doctors were intubating them and stuff like that. That's why people were dying. And many of our Roma didn't want to go to the hospital, they even hid that they had COVID so they wouldn't be admitted. And those of us who got sick, we never went to the hospital, we're alive. But those who went to the hospital did not come back. Not a single one." (BG_SOFIA_4)



Relationships with the probation system

- Recurring offending patterns

"Yes, I committed a crime, but when you punish someone, you also have to show them the right path. In this case, that is not happening. [...] Back when I went to prison for a year and a half, do you know what prison taught me? Not to stop committing crimes, but when I do commit them, how to do it so I don't get caught. What are we talking about – you go in there to serve your sentence, but inside you meet people who teach you how to do it more intelligently next time so that you don't get punished." BG_SOFIA_15

Solutions and

hopes

"If there were jobs for everyone, Roma people would not engage in mischief. To live better lives, Roma people should not marry so early, but should pursue higher education. This would also change attitudes towards them."

(BG_BS_17)

"I don't want people to look at us differently. Roma people should have a chance to prove what they can do." (BG_SOFIA_13)



Discrimination and

racism Recurrent stereotypes experienced

Respondents frequently reported encountering the following stereotypes about Roma people:

- Criminalisation: The belief that Roma are prone to theft or dishonest behavior, e.g., "Roma people would steal your purse."
- Work Ethic Bias: The perception that Roma are lazy or unreliable, often leading to the assumption that they are unsuitable or unwanted as workers.
- Educational Deficit: The stereotype that Roma are uneducated or lack intellectual capability.
- Physical Profiling: The assumption that certain physical features automatically indicate Roma ethnicity.

Subtle vs. overt discrimination

Resilience and support mechanisms

"As for life, whatever God has given me, that's all there is. I can't define it, because when you start defining something, something always goes wrong. [...] You set yourself a goal and, over time, something goes wrong. That's why I said, whatever is meant to happen, happens. Yes, whatever is meant to be." (BG_PLEVEN_1)

Roma people don't traditionally have a multi-level social structure so they think in terms of family and local community: mutual support mechanisms



Aspirations and messages for social change



- Need to look more at the good examples

"Roma people should be given a chance to show what they can do—not just be dismissed the moment they are seen." (BG_SOFIA_1)

- Roma people should change

"I no longer like the ghettos. Yes, that's where I'm from, that's where I grew up, but I don't want my children to grow up there. I want them to live a completely different life." (BG_SOFIA_16.2)

- Ethnic Bulgarian parents should teach children equality

"On my street, Bulgarians and Roma live together wonderfully because they grew up together and know each other. If Bulgarian and Roma children interact from an early age, discrimination may decrease. This must start with the parents." (BG_SOFIA_4)

Key insights and recommendations

Roma people:

- are highly diverse experiencing ongoing social and cultural change
- struggle between traditions and social norms
- aware of their strengths and challenges
- feel underestimated by the ethnic majority

Therefore

as a society we should:

- engage Roma voices in policy design
- strengthen support for Roma youth in education
- promote skills development and employment pathways.

The Probation service can:

- strengthen collaboration with Roma community mediators
- rethink rehabilitation plans to reflect real living conditions
- Introduce outreach sessions in Roma neighbourhoods...

Thank you!



Maria Doichinova
maria.doichinova@csd.eu

Center for the Study of
Democracy



<https://csd.eu>