

POLICY BRIEF

Segregated Maternity Wards, Reproductive Rights Abuses, and Obstetric Violence Against Romani Women

Research in Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia has found that many Romani women have experienced racial harassment and humiliation, medical neglect and abuse during childbirth. When it comes to reproductive rights, Romani women often find themselves at the cruel intersection of racism, gender-based and institutional violence. The experiences of Romani women in

reproductive health care point to violations of the respective states' human rights obligations under international and domestic law. The racist abuse these women experience amounts to a clear breach of EU Law, which should protect citizens against discrimination on the grounds of sex, and ethnic or racial origin when accessing health care.

SEGREGATED MATERNITY WARDS

In **SLOVAKIA**, research by the [Center for Reproductive Rights](#), found that Romani women in the eastern part of the country experienced segregation in maternity care departments, racial harassment and humiliation, neglect, physical restraint and abuse during childbirth, and failures related to informed consent and decision-making with regard to medical treatment.

As regards segregation, almost all of the Romani women interviewed stated that that they were segregated in maternity departments due to their Roma ethnic origin and confirmed the existence of Roma-only bathrooms.

- This segregation resulted in **overcrowding** as the 'Roma-only rooms' were inadequate for the number of women they held.
- Many women reported **poor sanitation** in the segregated rooms, that hospital staff failed to ensure the sanitation and cleanliness of "Roma-only rooms," and did not provide the same level of service to them as to non-Roma women in other rooms.
- Women said that due to the overcrowding in the segregated rooms, they could not spend time with, and were effectively **separated from their newborn babies**.
- Almost all of the women interviewed explained that they felt **upset and humiliated** at being placed in separate "Roma-only rooms," and due to the other forms of segregation they described.

[Fact-finding research](#) by the ERRC and its partners in **BULGARIA** revealed that Romani women routinely experience discriminatory treatment, segregated maternity wards,



verbal and physical harassment and obstetric violence in various public hospitals in Bulgaria. The vast majority of women interviewed claimed that they were placed in separate rooms from the ethnic Bulgarians.

- In Sliven, Romani women were often placed into so-called ‘**isolator rooms**’, intended to separate women with registered or suspected infectious diseases, or poor hygiene. The explanation given was that Romani women are disproportionately placed there because “*they often do not have health insurance and have not, therefore, undergone essential medical examinations during pregnancy that would identify whether they were carriers of infectious diseases*”. Other Romani women interviewed were told that they were segregated because ‘you have lice and steal’
- Many of the women experienced **unhygienic and overcrowded conditions**. They described having to share a single bathroom and toilet with twelve Romani women, while ethnic Bulgarian women had private bathrooms. The ‘Roma rooms’ were much dirtier and were cleaned less frequently than the ‘Bulgarian rooms’. Many bathrooms lacked hot water, soap, and toilet paper.
- The Romani women felt **neglected by the medical staff** in comparison with the non-Romani mothers. One interviewee stated: “*There was a huge difference. The Bulgarians received much more attention than us. For the staff, we were ‘dirty gypsies’*”

OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMANI WOMEN ‘COMMONPLACE’

While in recent years, obstetric violence against women has gained growing attention globally, revealing it to be [widespread and systematic in nature](#), it still remains highly underreported and in urgent need of being addressed from a rights-based perspective.

According to Hungary’s EMMA Association, young Romani women are particularly vulnerable to obstetric violence, and no European country has so far put in place legislation specifically criminalising it. Romani women often find themselves at the cruel intersection of racism, gender-based and institutional violence.

In the course of ERRC research in **HUNGARY**, interviewees reported that they had been physically abused in the hospital during childbirth – instances included being slapped on the face and beaten on the thighs. Many reported racist and disparaging verbal abuse.

In 2017, a Hungarian Romani woman won her case before [the Equality Body in Budapest](#) following **harassment and racist abuse** by hospital staff while she was giving birth. The ERRC provided support to the litigant, in what was a first of its kind. The woman was alone in the hospital and intimidated by staff who threatened to put a pillow over her face to silence her, and to take her child away, and shouted that “you gypsies give birth only for the money!”

In **SLOVAKIA**, almost all of the Romani women interviewed had been subjected to **disrespectful treatment and abuse** by medical personnel in gynaecology offices or hospital maternity departments. Their accounts described being subjected to many different forms of abusive conduct. The women found this mistreatment demeaning and threatening, and it ranged from crude verbal insults, including racial slurs, to actual physical abuse.



Some of the women interviewed also described feeling **neglected during labour** and childbirth and that they were treated only after non-Roma patients. They also said that they were not fully and adequately informed about their medical treatment. Many women explained that their experiences left them feeling humiliated, ashamed, angry, and afraid.

Similarly in **BULGARIA**, the Romani women were sworn at and abused in terms described as **derogatory and dehumanising**. Numerous interviewees stated that they had been immobilised or restrained during delivery, with their hands bound, and that they had been physically abused during delivery – beaten, pinched, and slapped to silence them or speed up delivery. Most attributed the discrimination they experienced in the hospital to their ethnicity, low economic status, and poor education, and in some cases their young age.

TO PROTECT ROMANI WOMEN'S RIGHTS, STATE AUTHORITIES MUST:

1

Establish effective measures to ensure the full implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and human rights obligations pertaining to reproductive and obstetric health care.

2

Address systemic and intersectional discrimination in reproductive health care and invest adequate resources to ensure that Romani women have equal access to quality health services.

3

Establish procedures and mechanisms to prevent and sanction the segregation of Roma women in maternity wards and eradicate the harmful consequences of such practices.

4

Gather comprehensive data on sexual and reproductive health disaggregated by gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and monitor the differential impacts that laws, policies, and practices have on Romani women in reproductive health care settings.