

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perspectives of Roma Women on Gender Equality: A Qualitative Study in Mersin

Burcu Şanlı¹ Sibel Furtana²

¹ Dr., Mersin University, Social Sciences Institute, Department of Women's Studies, Mersin/Turkey

ORCID: [0000-0002-2573-7733](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2573-7733)

E-Mail: sanli.burcu@hotmail.com

² PhD., Mersin University, Social Sciences Institute, Department of Psychology

ORCID: [0000-0002-8495-7699](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8495-7699)

E-Mail: sibelfurtana@gmail.com

Corresponding Author:
Burcu Şanlı

Abstract

This research was conducted with the aim of examining the perspectives of Roma women on gender equality within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The study was designed based on the phenomenological approach, which is a qualitative research method. The study group was limited to ten Roma women residing in Mersin. The data for the research were obtained through individual in-depth interviews. In the analysis of the data, the content analysis technique was used. As a result of content analysis, the research findings were examined by forming themes within the sub-goals set for 'Gender Equality,' one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These themes include: (1) Education, (2) Discrimination against women and girls, (3) Domestic violence, (4) Early or forced marriage, (5) Economic and social opportunity equality (6) Reproductive health and rights. According to the research findings, Roma community often adheres to traditional views, Roma women experience gender inequality, lack access to quality education, lack economic and social opportunities, and are not sufficiently involved in public spaces and the workforce. It has been revealed that Roma women face discrimination due to both their ethnic origin and gender, which causes double disadvantage in the context of intersectionality

Keywords: Gender equality, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Roma women, double disadvantage, intersectionality

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Öz

Bu araştırma, 'Birleşmiş Milletler Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri' kapsamında, Roman kadınların toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine ilişkin görüşlerinin incelenmesi amacıyla yapılmıştır. Araştırma, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden fenomenolojik yaklaşıma dayalı olarak desenlenmiştir. Çalışma grubu, Mersin ilinde ikamet eden on Roman kadın ile sınırlıdır. Araştırmanın verileri, bireysel derinlemesine görüşme tekniği kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. Verilerin analizinde, içerik analizi tekniği kullanılmıştır. İçerik analizi sonucunda araştırma bulguları, Birleşmiş Milletler Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri'nden biri olan 'Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği' için belirlenen alt hedefler kapsamında temalar oluşturularak incelenmiştir. Bu temalar: (1) Eğitim (2) Kadınlara ve kız çocuklarına yönelik ayrımcılık, (3) Aile içi şiddet, (4) Erken yaşta ya da zoraki evlilik, (5) Ekonomik ve sosyal fırsat eşitliği, (6) Üreme sağlığı ve üreme hakları şeklindedir. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, Roman toplumunun çoğu zaman geleneksel görüşlere sahip olduğu, Roman kadınların toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğine maruz kaldıkları, nitelikli eğitim imkanına erişemedikleri, ekonomik ve sosyal fırsat eşitliğine sahip olmadıkları, kamusal alana ve çalışma yaşamına yeterince katılmadıkları belirlenmiştir. Roman kadınların, hem etnik kökenleri hem de cinsiyetleri nedeniyle ayrımcılıkla karşı karşıya kaldıkları, bu durumun da kesişimsellik bağlamında çifte dezavantaja neden olduğu ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, Birleşmiş Milletler Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri, Roman kadınlar, çifte dezavantaj, kesişimsellik.

Introduction

The concept of gender, pertains to the socially constructed obligations and responsibilities of women and men, femininity and masculinity, rather than physical attributes that lead to differences based on their sex (Günindi-Ersoz, 2016:21-22). According to Giddens (2000:616,621), the term "gender" refers not only to the physical attributes, but also to the socially constructed characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Within the socialization process, the differences between boys and girls regarding what they learn and the cultural expectations of gender-appropriate roles are examined within this concept. Gender is used to indicate that the disparities between sexes are more dependent on social processes rather than biological processes (Dökmen, 2009:23-25). Gender is defined as a culturally, regionally, and historically varying gender identity. This concept not only addresses gender differences but also explains the unequal power relations between genders (Berktaş, 2009:16). "Gender equality" refers to individuals having equal access to and utilization of existing resources, opportunities, and power within various social institutions such as family, work, law, education, politics, religion, and healthcare. Gender-based inequalities encompass social, economic, public, legal, and political rights, as well as issues such as access to education, employment, land, and capital, limited access to healthcare and related services, and experiences of violence, harassment, and abuse (Ecevit, 2003: 83-85).

The United Nations defines "sustainable development" as economic, social, and environmental development that ensures present and future generations' well-being, dignity, gender equality, ecological integrity, and social justice (United Nations, 2014: 26). Sustainable development, which encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions, is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Engin and Akgoz, 2013: 85). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals consist of 17 main goals and 169 targets. The fifth goal called "Gender equality, empowerment of women and girls" includes targets such as: 'Ending

discrimination against women and girls', 'eliminating all forms of violence, eradicate early and forced marriages', 'promoting the sharing of responsibilities within the family', 'attributing unpaid care and housework', 'providing equal opportunities for women in political, economic and social life and decision-making processes' and 'providing access to sexual health and reproductive rights' (United Nation, 2014).

According to the results of studies conducted on the Roma community in Turkey, Roma individuals face various challenges such as poverty, social exclusion, limited access to education services, insufficient employment opportunities or informal work, lack of social security coverage, inability to benefit from social assistance programs, unhealthy housing conditions, discrimination, and similar issues (Akkan, Deniz, & Ertan, 2011; Aksu, 2003; Arayıcı, 1999; Çelik, & Yüce-Tar, 2015; Fırat, & İlhan, 2019; Kolukırık, 2006; Özkan, 2000). In order to improve the living conditions of the Roma, the "Strategy Document for Roma Citizens" (2023-2030) was prepared by the Ministry of Family and Social Services of the Republic of Turkey. The 'Action Plans' are based on education, employment, housing, health, social services, social assistance and general policy issues. Gender inequality experienced by women in the Roma community; multidimensional disadvantage is most transparently visible. This situation is discussed under the headings of education, employment, health, poverty and social exclusion (Kaymak & Yılmaz, 2022:67). At this point, in addition to the limitations brought by the Roma society, the disadvantages that Roma women experience due to their gender can be defined as a 'double disadvantage' in the context of 'intersectionality'.

In the literature, it is seen that various researches, projects and activities have been carried out by associations and federations regarding Roma. However, it has been determined that scientific studies are limited in number. In this regard, there is a need for research that focuses on Roma women's perspectives on gender equality, taking into account the challenges they face.

The purpose of this research is to examine the perspectives of Roma women on gender equality

within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The qualitative study analyzed research findings within six themes, which were created in parallel with the sub-goals established for the Sustainable Development Goal of 'Gender Equality': (1) Education, (2) Discrimination against women and girls, (3) Domestic violence, (4) Early or forced marriage, (5) Economic and social opportunity equality, (6) Sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Method

Model of the Research

This research is designed based on the phenomenological approach, which is one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenology refers to the sum of lived experiences belonging to a single person (Giorgi, 1997: 236). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to describe people's understandings, feelings, perspectives, and perceptions of a particular experience, situation, or concept (Rose, Beeby & Parker, 1995: 1124).

Population and Sample of the Research

The population of this research consists of all Roma women residing in Mersin province. The study group is limited to ten Roma women who are 18 years of age or older, voluntarily participating in the research and selected through snowball sampling method. The distribution of socio-demographic characteristics of the participating Roma women is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Socio-Demographical Characteristics of Roma Women

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Number
Age	
20-30 years	4
31-40 years	2
41-50 years	3
51-60 years	1
Marital Status	
Married	10
Single	0
Marriage Age	

14-17 years	3
18-21 years	5
21 years and above	2
Family Type	
Nuclear family	4
Extended family	6
Educational Status	
Literate and did not complete primary school	4
Primary school	4
Middle school	1
High school	0
Associate degree	1
Number of Siblings	
1-3 siblings	4
3-5 siblings	0
5-7 siblings	4
7-9 siblings	2
Working Status	
Working	5
Not working	5
Retired	0
Place of Birth	
Adana	4
Mersin	6
Longest Lived Settlement	
Adana	2
Antalya	1
Mersin	6
Niğde	1
Total	10

Data Collection Tools

The data for the study were collected through the "personal information form" and the "individual in-depth interview questionnaire." The "personal information form" aimed to determine the socio-demographic characteristics that could influence the participants' views on gender equality. The "individual in-depth interview questionnaire," which served as another data collection tool, aimed to gather information from Roma women on various topics.

Application of Data Collection Tools

The research data was collected between September 4, 2020, and September 14, 2020, by responsible researchers using the individual in-depth interview technique. The interviews were conducted either at the Mediterranean Roma Associations Federation building, frequently

visited by Roma people in Mersin province, or in the participants' homes. The entire data was recorded using an audio recording device. Verbal and written consent was obtained from the participants for the interviews and recording purposes. The average duration of the interviews was 40 minutes. A total of 382 minutes of audio recordings and 84 pages of transcriptions were obtained.

Analysis of Data

The data obtained from individual in-depth interviews was first transferred to computer software by transcribing the interview transcripts. Content analysis method was used for the qualitative analysis of the transferred data in the computer software. After carefully reading the raw data, the data was coded by the researcher. The coded data was then brought together to form themes. The generated themes were sent to two experts with qualitative research experience for their opinions. After receiving the expert feedback, the content analysis was completed.

Limitations of the Research

The main limitation of the study is the low number of participants who agreed to have face-to-face interviews due to the pandemic.

Findings

The themes and codes obtained from the analysis of the findings collected through interviews on gender equality of Roma women are presented in Table 2.

As indicated in Table 2, the findings obtained through the conducted interviews are categorized under six themes: 'education', 'discrimination against women and girls', 'domestic violence', 'early or forced marriage', 'economic and social opportunity equality', and 'reproductive health and rights'.

Education Theme

In the study, a significant majority of the participants (n=8) have discontinued their education. Most of the participants (n=6) have inadequate study opportunities at home, and a considerable portion of them (n=4) have not been able to access educational opportunities. Among the ten women participating in the research, four have only basic literacy skills or have not completed primary school, while four have completed primary school.

The participants expressed their reasons for not being able to complete their education. Some mentioned having to work at an early age due to poverty (n=3), having the obligation to take care of younger siblings (n=2), and getting married at an early age (n=3). For example, H., a 24-year-old participant, stated, *"I really wanted to study. I wanted to go to regular high school. My older brothers didn't allow it. They hindered me. At that time, I had a friendship with my husband. So, I left my school and eloped with my husband. Now I am married and have two children. I'm very sad that I couldn't pursue my education. I want my children to achieve what I couldn't."*

Theme of Discrimination against Women and Girls

Almost all of the women participating in the research (n=9) expressed a positive outlook on life. Three participants mentioned that life is worth living despite its challenges. For example, Y., a 46-year-old participant, stated, *"I have to stand strong for my children."*

The majority of the participants (n=8) expressed the opinion that there should be different behaviors and attitudes in raising boys and girls within the family. T., a 33-year-old participant who advocated for the necessity of differences in raising boys and girls, stated, *"In my opinion, boys should be in the foreground and girls should be in the background. We need to limit girls. You never know what might happen if we don't set boundaries."*

The participants were asked, *"Are you happy to have been born as a woman?"* Six women answered "Yes", while four expressed the desire to have been born

Table 2.Views of Roma Women on Gender Equality

THEMES	CODES	f
Education	My education was interrupted.	8
	I did not have enough opportunities to study at home.	6
	I did not have access to education.	4
	I can only read and write.	4
	My other family members did not receive education either.	4
	My education was interrupted due to early marriage.	3
	I had to work at an early age due to poverty.	3
	I could not go to school because of the obligation to care for younger siblings.	2
Discrimination against Women and Girls	I have a positive outlook on life.	9
	There should be different behaviors and attitudes about raising girls and boys in the family.	8
	I have a positive view of children flirting.	7
	Being a Roma woman has its challenges.	6
	I am not happy that I was born as a woman.	6
	Girls are limited in the way they dress.	5
	Girls are limited in their entry and exit times.	4
	I am happy that I was born as a woman.	4
	Girls have trouble leaving the house.	4
	Life is worth living despite the difficulties.	3
	I am having difficulties because of the traditional family structure.	3
	There is inequality in gender roles.	2
	There should not be different behaviors and attitudes about raising girls and boys in the family.	2
	There is no discrimination against women and girls.	2
	Domestic Violence	I know the meaning of physical violence.
I have been emotionally abused.		6
I was exposed to economic violence.		5
I don't know about other types of violence other than physical violence.		4
While I was single, I experienced psychological pressure from the family.		5
Women should not be exposed to violence.		5
I have seen physical violence.		3
I experienced psychological pressure in marriage.		3
I have never been pressured.		2
Early or Forced Marriage	My marriage took place between the ages of 18-21.	5
	I married the person the elders saw fit.	4
	I got married at an early age.	3
	I had a forced marriage without my consent.	3
	I regret marriage.	2
Economic and Social Opportunity Equality	Women must work.	10
	Women's participation in working life is viewed positively by other people.	7
	Domestic responsibilities belong to women.	7
	My wife does not participate in the domestic work division.	7
	Men and women are not equal.	6
	I am not currently working in an income generating job.	5
	Equality between men and women is required.	4
	Men and women are equal.	
	Male wives help with domestic chores.	3
	After getting married, I ended my working life.	3
	I have to work.	3
	I want to return to business life.	2
Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights	I have children.	10
	I only go to the obstetrician if needed.	10
	Every woman must be a mother.	7
	I do not have enough information about reproductive health and reproductive rights.	4
	We had children in the first year of our marriage.	4
I don't think women should necessarily be mothers.	3	

as men. D., a 29-year-old participant who answered "No", explained, "*Being a man is very difficult; they have a lot of responsibilities. They have to provide for a family their whole life.*" S., a 28-year-old participant who expressed the desire to have been born as a man, stated, "*We both work. I cook, take care of the child, and do the cleaning. My husband doesn't help me at all.*"

Domestic Violence Theme

The participants were asked if they were aware of instances of violence within their families and the types of violence they experienced. It was found that all participants (n=10) were aware of what physical violence meant. However, when asked about other types of violence such as economic, emotional, and sexual violence, four participants stated that they were not familiar with these types of violence apart from physical violence. When the concept of violence and its different types were explained to the participants, five mentioned experiencing economic violence, three mentioned physical violence, and six mentioned emotional violence. D., a 31-year-old participant, shared her experience, saying, "*I have experienced every type of violence except for sexual violence in my marriage. That's why I separated from my husband for a while, but later I got back together for the sake of my children.*"

During the interviews, five participants stated that they experienced pressure from their families (mother, father, older or younger brothers) during their singlehood. Three participants mentioned feeling pressured after getting married. Two participants claimed that they never felt pressured at any stage of their lives.

Early or Forced Marriage Theme

All of the participating Roma women (n=10) are married. Three of the participants reported that they had entered into forced marriages without their personal consent. Four participants stated that their marriages were arranged by their families, following the traditional matchmaking process. 46-year-old Y. expressed, "*I am married to my uncle's son. The elders made the decision for my marriage.*" 42-year-old S. said, "*I got married late at*

the age of 34 under pressure. To be fair, they weren't entirely wrong. I was a woman who didn't work or study, so why should I remain at home after the age of 34?" 31-year-old D. commented, "*I married my husband by mutual agreement. However, my three sisters got married through arranged marriages.*"

According to the findings obtained from the interviews, it was determined that three participants got married at a young age, between 14 and 17. Five participants, on the other hand, got married between the ages of 18 and 21. Two participants stated that they regretted their marriage even though they had given their consent beforehand. 29-year-old M. expressed, "*As Roma people, we form our friendships and marriages within our own community, with other Roma individuals. We get married at a young age, and then we regret it.*"

Theme of Economic and Social Opportunity Equality

In the research, participants were asked whether they were employed or not in terms of economic and social equal opportunities. Half of the participants (n=5) stated that they were not employed. However, out of the five participants who mentioned not being employed, three stated that they had worked before getting married but were unable to work afterwards due to having young children and the lack of someone to provide care for them.

All participants (n=10) in the research expressed the opinion that women must work. A significant majority of the participants (n=7) indicated that people generally view women's presence in the workforce positively. Seven participants stated that their spouses did not contribute to household chores and that all the responsibilities fell on them. 42-year-old S. stated, "*As women, we can do many things we want, but we are not equal when it comes to the division of household chores and child care.*"

Four participants expressed the view that "*Women and men should be equal.*" The opinion of 29-year-old S. on this matter is as follows: "*There should be equality between women and men, but I actually expect this equality, the absence of any form of violence, and the increase in job opportunities not from society, but from women themselves.*"

Theme of Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights

All of the Roma women participants in the study (n=10) are mothers. Four participants stated that they had children in the first year of their marriage. Seven participants advocated the view that *"Every woman should be a mother."* 29-year-old M. expressed, *"Every woman should be a mother. In the Roma society, there is no woman without children."* On the other hand, 33-year-old T. stated, *"Every woman should be a mother. Why should there be unrest in her home? Let her have at least one child. Otherwise, there may be people telling her she is infertile and advising her to give up."*

All of the participants (n=10) stated that they visit a gynecologist when necessary. Four participants expressed that they do not have sufficient knowledge about reproductive health and reproductive rights. 46-year-old Y. stated, *"I last went for a check-up when my son was one and a half years old. Now my son is seven years old."* The views of 42-year-old S. are as follows: *"I cannot afford to have regular check-ups because I don't have health insurance. Our economic situation is not good, so I can't go to the doctor when I need to."*

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, when evaluating the participants' views on the theme of "education," it has been revealed that Roma women do not have sufficient access to education and do not receive quality education due to various reasons. These reasons include poverty, the lack of prioritization of education due to poverty, early marriages, inadequate physical conditions in the home environment, and the need to work at a young age. The fact that Roma women have to work from a young age due to poverty, the responsibility of taking care of their siblings, and the prioritization of basic physiological needs such as nutrition and shelter due to poverty have directly affected their education process. A 44-year-old participant states, *"Non-Roma girls continue their education when they have boyfriends. We get married at the age of 13-14 and drop out of school immediately."* This statement highlights the

situation of early marriages as a reason for the incomplete education of Roma youth. In the research, the issue of ending educational life in the Roma community is often attributed to environmental factors, as mentioned in this example, and it is stated that very few individuals receive education. According to Günindi Ersöz (2016:68), education is one of the fundamental tools for elevating individuals' social status within society. Despite being a powerful tool for both social and individual change that can minimize gender inequalities, education is not provided to girls or they are forced to drop out early. According to Genç, Taylan and Barış (2015), Roma individuals do not have sufficient access to educational opportunities. The obligation to attend schools based on residential address makes it difficult for Roma individuals living in segregated areas to have educational opportunities with non-Roma groups. In the Roma community, girls' school attendance rate is low because of traditional reasons (Balkız ve Göktepe, 2014: 15). Gökçe (2019:884) evaluated the dropout status of girls from education in the Roma community at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class.

In the scope of the research, when examining the theme of "discrimination against women and girls," the views of the participants reveal the unequal treatment and gender roles within the Roma community. A 28-year-old participant, S., expresses her opinion by saying, *"I don't think men and women are equal in our society, nor in the Roma community. We restrict and interfere more with girls in terms of how they dress and where they go. Boys are raised more freely and independently. They are not interfered with as much."* Another participant, D., aged 31, states, *"In our community, men are considered superior. Women are always told things like 'you're a woman, cook, take care of your children, and if your husband yells at you, stay quiet.' Women are always oppressed."* It has been observed that although the participants adopt an egalitarian perspective on gender equality (such as equal opportunities in the workforce, choice of partner, and fair division of labor), they feel that they cannot achieve the desired equality in household chores, childcare, commuting hours, and clothing style due to societal expectations and predefined gender roles. The research concludes that the

participating Roma women have an egalitarian view of gender equality and advocate for gender equality. However, they argue that the societal expectations and assigned roles prevent the realization of this equality. According to Dökmen (2009:101), discrimination is the behavioral expression of prejudices and stereotypes. It is possible to mention the existence of racial and gender discrimination. Çetin (2017:86) argues that racial prejudice and discrimination occupy a significant place, especially in Western literature. Throughout history, Roma people have faced prejudice and discrimination, including social exclusion, poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited access to basic rights and services. According to Uzpeder et al. (2008:1), Roma people in Turkey face prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion from both the general population and other minority groups. They are still not fully accepted as an integral part of society and encounter significant barriers in exercising their basic rights on an equal basis with other citizens. Fırat and İlhan (2019:276) suggest that Roma people are viewed with skepticism due to their lifestyle, behaviors, physical characteristics, and seclusion. As a result, they have constantly been rejected and subjected to various forms of exclusion. Roma women face multiple discriminations at the 'intersection of gender, ethnicity and class'. This situation limits their participation in the public sphere (Ravnø, 2011:12-15). Therefore, Roma women transmit the same problems from generation to generation in a vicious circle.

In the scope of the research, participants' views on various forms of "domestic violence", including physical, economic, emotional, and sexual violence, were examined. Six participants reported experiencing emotional violence, five experienced economic violence, and three experienced physical violence. A 46-year-old participant, Y., said, "*I experienced physical violence in my marriage. It happened, you know. But no woman should experience violence. We see physical violence a lot around us and on television. I think women should have rights. Do they have any? I don't know.*" It was determined that Roma women, when they become victims of violence, lack sufficient knowledge about their legal rights as women. Some participants

expressed that even if they were subjected to any form of violence, they couldn't openly talk about it and could conceal it. Additionally, participant H. expressed the opinion, "*Who would admit to experiencing violence?*" All participants in the research stated that they had not experienced sexual violence. It was observed that participants avoided using the term "sexual violence" and instead said, "I haven't experienced that," while avoiding eye contact with the researcher. The acceptance and internalization of violence by women, due to the patriarchal structure of society, may explain why instances of domestic violence are sometimes not disclosed. Furthermore, it was argued that women should be involved in the workforce to have control over their homes, to obtain their needs freely, and to avoid economic violence from their partners. A 42-year-old participant, S., expressed the view, "*Roma women must work in order to raise their voices and say I exist.*" Participants believe that economic independence leads to less exposure to inequality, spousal pressure, and domestic violence. When examining the literature, it is stated that violence against women is an important social problem that has persisted from the past to the present, with violence having a learned dimension and being transmitted from generation to generation (Altıparmak, 2018). In patriarchal societies, when the traditional and cultural structures assigned to women and men are examined, the dominance of men over women leads to the occurrence of violence and creates a basis for the normalization of violence. This situation leads to women who internalize violence to choose silence instead of seeking help (Yılmaz, 2015). It can be said that Roma women are suppressed by violence and confined to traditional roles. Institutions such as family, education, state, religion, and media are places where gender roles are reproduced in the social structure. Women's productive powers, fertility, sexuality, freedom of movement, and property rights are controlled by the male-dominant system (Saygılıgil, 2016:9).

When the theme of "early or forced marriage" was evaluated within the scope of the research, it was found that a significant number of women participating in the study got married at a very young age. It was also noted that some marriages

were forced marriages without consent, under the pressure of family or society. Additionally, it is an important finding that all participants in the research were married and had children. This finding alone raises questions about the traditional perspective of the Roma community towards women and family. Based on this information, it can be argued that Roma women are not free to make decisions about their own lives and bodies. When the literature on research conducted in the Roma community is examined, parallel results can be observed. Taylan (2016) revealed that the average age of marriage in the Roma community is 12, and nearly half of the marriages take place before the age of 18. Early marriages lead to Roma women being disconnected from education. The reasons for early marriages include love, ignorance, family wishes, kinship relations, societal conditions, compulsion, family problems, and fear of not being able to marry later. Ugurlu (2013) states that the crowded living conditions of large family members in a single room due to poverty lead to a lack of privacy within families, creating an environment that encourages early marriages for both girls and boys.

When evaluated in terms of "economic and social equal opportunities," the Roma women participating in the research emphasize the importance of being part of the workforce. However, they state that when they are in the working environment, they have a say in their homes and feel stronger and more liberated. H., a 24-year-old participant, expressed the opinion that "...Roma women cannot work in insured jobs because they lack documentation." S., a 28-year-old participant, made an observation stating, "We are marginalized; being both women and Roma is a disadvantage for us." They also mentioned that they often have to hide their identities when among non-Roma individuals. Despite facing discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, gender inequality, and poverty, it is observed that Roma women continue to struggle against the difficulties of life and strive to keep their families together. When examining the research results conducted on Roma people in the literature, it is evident that concepts such as prejudice and social exclusion stand out as the underlying problems in terms of economic and social equal opportunities. The

labeling of Roma people with terms like dangerous, outsiders, others, and risky groups has subjected them to various forms of oppression in the societies they live in. Due to the perceptions formed about the Roma community, they are in a disadvantaged position socio-economically and culturally (Adıguzel, 2020). When the perception of marginalization towards the Roma community is combined with being a woman, women stated that they have to hide their Roma identity next to "gadjos" (non-Roma) and experience a double disadvantage as "other Roma women." Roma women engage in a significant struggle against poverty. (Balkan, 2020). In order to address the discrimination, risks, and other difficulties faced by women due to gender inequality, it is necessary to establish preventive and protective social policies aimed at resolving these issues (Bağdatlı-Vural, 2016:104). The insufficient participation of women in public life, their confinement to the private sphere, and their inadequate access to education and employment opportunities lead to poverty. This situation can be defined as the impoverishment of women. Being dependent on a life without economic freedom makes women vulnerable to all forms of violence in a male-dominated society. The concept of social rights, as defined by Çelik and Yüce-Tar (2015:621), includes the provision of compulsory education, healthcare, and social services to everyone, as well as the right to a civilized and quality life in accordance with the prevailing standards in society. Due to the unequal distribution of social rights, certain segments of the population are deprived of these rights, causing a widening gap between the average and the marginalized. Akkan, Deniz and Ertan (2011:25) underline that Roma people are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Turkish society and being Roma is a state of poverty. The main problem areas mentioned are employment, education, housing, and health. According to Akgül (2021), it has a paradoxical effect that Roma girls have to work at an early age and end their education. While it causes women to remain uneducated, work in informal, insecure and temporary jobs, it causes them to learn to survive by gaining a sense of responsibility and become stronger in public life.

During the research, it was found that the Roma women interviewed had insufficient knowledge about “reproductive health and rights”. They mentioned that they only visit doctors in case of emergency instead of regular check-ups, and early marriages often lead to childbirth within the first year of marriage. It is important to note that all participants in the research were married and had children, which reflects the traditional perspective of the Roma community towards women and family. The educational status of the participants varied, with some being literate but having left primary school, while others had completed primary school or had attended vocational school. It was observed that in the Roma community, having a child is highly valued, and motherhood is seen as a 'duty' for women. Women who are unable to have children are mentioned to be excluded and pitied. As the educational level of Roma women increases, their evaluation styles of events and situations differ. Four participants argued that women who cannot have children are looked upon with pity in the Roma community, while six participants mentioned being excluded and judged for not being able to give birth. A 31-year-old participant named D. shared her opinion, saying, *"As soon as we get married, we should have children. If a woman doesn't have a child, they ask why you don't have a child."* Based on the obtained opinions, it can be suggested that the lack of regular doctor check-ups regarding reproductive health is related to the economic insufficiency and lack of social security. Literature review reveals that there is a lack of research specifically focused on the reproductive health and rights of Roma women. A study conducted by Eskioçak and Akbaşak (2017) comparing Roma and non-Roma women in Edirne province found that 42.8% of Roma women had social security, while 79% of non-Roma women had social security. However, according to a study on Racism Xenophobia by the European Monitoring Centre (2023), which also addresses the issue of Roma women's reproductive health, barriers to Roma women's access to the health system are linked to their working conditions, educational status and culture. In addition, Roma's problems such as difficult working conditions in marginal professions, early marriages, lack of sufficient knowledge about

reproductive and sexual health, high fertility and abortion rates can also be listed among the problems experienced by Roma women.

Conclusion

Through in-depth individual interviews conducted with Roma women residing in Mersin, this research has gathered insights regarding economic, social, and environmental issues, as well as views on gender inequality, discrimination, and disadvantages faced by the community. The participants' perspectives have been examined within the framework of the sub-goals set for achieving "gender equality," one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These perspectives shed light on the educational opportunities for Roma women and girls, the discrimination they face, domestic violence often experienced within families, early or non-consensual marriages, decision-making regarding motherhood, reproductive health, as well as access to economic resources, social services, and opportunities.

According to the research findings, it has been determined that the Roma women who participated in the study generally hold egalitarian views regarding gender equality. However, the results obtained from the participants' statements indicate that the Roma community often adheres to traditional beliefs. It has been identified that Roma women are subjected to gender inequality, lack access to quality education, do not have equal economic and social opportunities, and are unable to fully participate in the public sphere and work life. It has also been determined that Roma women experience discrimination not only based on their ethnic background but also due to their gender, highlighting the double disadvantage they face.

Lastly, it has been revealed that women experience inequality due to poverty in addition to being exposed to patriarchal family structure and gender discrimination in Roma society in the context of 'intersectionality'. It is believed that this research will contribute to the literature by examining Roma women within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and the perspective of gender equality. Particularly, it is necessary to increase access to education

opportunities for Roma women and promote affirmative actions to enable their participation in the public sphere and employment. In order to improve the quality of life for Roma women, it is essential for the government, local authorities, universities, and civil society organizations to collaborate and develop policies. Projects should be designed to prevent discrimination against Roma women, which is often fueled by prejudiced perceptions and stereotypes. The 'Local Equality Action Plans' of local governments should include the strengthening of the Roma community and the improvement of living conditions. District-based studies should be planned in order for social inclusion to be realized. Thus, through the work with microgroups, a meaningful contribution will be made to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals on improving the living standards of the Roma community.

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