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**VULNERABILITY AND DISCRIMINATION UNDER BULGARIAN CONDITIONS:
SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS**

Ph. D. Boris Manov

South-West University Neofit “Neofit Rilski”, Bulgaria
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4956-3598>
bmanov@swu.bg

Ph. D. Valentina Milenkova

South-West University Neofit “Neofit Rilski”, Bulgaria
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7592-1475>
vmilenkova@swu.bg

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Abstract

The article considers vulnerability and discrimination, its state and factors for its existence through identifying and profiling the groups affected in the areas of healthcare, workplace, working conditions, social inclusion, equal opportunities; and outlining the conditions that create different forms of discrimination. In the paper is presented the thesis that vulnerability is a prerequisite for discrimination because people at risk are in the situation of unequal treatment in society. The main features of social vulnerability and discrimination are related to the deficits in training and work patterns; in the modification of employment contracts and forms of recruitment, as well as in the social inclusion. The article is based on the carried out in 2017 a national representative survey “Identifying and making profiles of groups and communities most affected by the risk of discrimination” in the implementation of Action 1 of the project “Prevention of discrimination and creating equal opportunities “BG05M9OP0013.003-0001-C001”” with team leader prof. Valentina Milenkova. The sample included 3600 individuals in the 18+ age group, and by collecting and analyzing representative national and regional (NUTS 2) empirical data. The main results show that the following groups are vulnerable and at risk of discrimination: unemployed people; individuals with low incomes and low level of education; people over 55 years of age; individuals without national health insurance; ethnic minorities.

Keywords

Discrimination – Vulnerability – Segregation – Vulnerable groups

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Introduction

Vulnerability is a prerequisite for discrimination, as people at risk are most prone to unequal treatment in society. Vulnerability manifests itself in various areas of life: labor market, consumption, income distribution and depends on the state of the economy, education, politics. In general, the state of crises, the uncertain material environment and the unstable national economy and institutions create preconditions for the development of vulnerability and socio-psychological fluctuations¹. The most at risk are usually those who have the least choice and "whose lives are marked by discrimination, physical disability, lack of education and employment, illness, lack of legal rights and other historical practices rooted in domination and marginalization"².

The main characteristics of the vulnerability are caused by discrepancies in the models of training and work; in changing employment paths and growing job insecurity, in increasing stress and tension in the overall environment and relationships.

This article is aimed at: 1) identifying and profiling the groups affected by vulnerability and discrimination in the areas of healthcare, workplace, working conditions, social inclusion, equal opportunities. 2) Outlining the conditions and factors that create different forms of vulnerability in socio-psychological terms.

The analysis refers to vulnerability in contemporary Bulgarian conditions.

Our thesis is that in the current situation the preconditions for vulnerability are increasing and they are related to poverty and poor living conditions in society, manifested in insecurity and instability.

The vulnerability is also related to the family and restructures the responsibility for the members who cannot take care of themselves, into a serious problem - unemployed, disabled, elderly, single parents. In this regard, it should be emphasized that social assistance systems do not always provide systematic protection for all risk groups; or if they offer support, it is not enough to ensure normal well-being and life. Thus, several factors accumulate: insecure income and job, unstable family support, which social protection systems cannot always cope with.

In general, discrimination means unequal treatment of different people and groups based on certain characteristics: gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, background, religion, personal or social status, marital status, age, sexual orientation. The unequal treatment is expressed:

in:

- restricting the rights of individuals or groups of people;
- granting rights and benefits (privileges) that are not recognized for all people and groups of people. Discrimination enters the theoretical consideration as part of the political context and, in this sense, it brings certain political characteristics.

¹ T. Verlage; V. Milenkova y A. B. Ribeiro, "Tackling vulnerability through lifelong learning policies?", M. Parreira do Amaral; S. Kovacheva y X. Rambla (eds.) Lifelong Learning policies for Young Adults in Europe (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), 127-149.

² R. Bolin y L. Stanford, Shelter, Housing and Recovery: a comparison of U.S. Disasters. Disasters, Vol: 15 num 1 (1991): 24-34.

According to international law, discrimination has the following characteristics:

- There is an unfavorable treatment for an individual;
- It stems from a restriction / prohibition based on an obvious external feature;
- There is no objective and reasonable justification for the sanction imposed.

The legal framework of protection against discrimination in Europe is also present in the European Union (EU) law and is expressed in a wide range of normative documents, policies and directives on human rights and anti-discrimination.

Our understanding is that all discriminated people are vulnerable. In this sense, the study of discrimination shows the process of vulnerability.

Methodology and Empirical framework

In 2017 a national representative survey "Identifying and making profiles of groups and communities most affected by the risk of discrimination" in the implementation of Action 1 of the project "Prevention of discrimination and creating equal opportunities" BG05M9OP0013.003-0001-C001" with team leader prof.Valentina Milenkova was conducted. The sample included 3600 individuals in the 18+ age group, and by collecting and analyzing representative national and regional (NUTS 2) empirical data, the groups and communities subject to discrimination are identified separately in the following areas: 1) healthcare; 2) workplace; 3) working conditions; 4) social inclusion; 5) equal opportunities.

The survey aimed to identify and profile the groups and communities most affected by discrimination and at risk of social exclusion at national and regional level; as an adjunct to it, to detect the factors which bring about increase of discriminatory acts in the areas of employment, interaction with public institutions, healthcare, equal opportunities and non-discrimination. On the basis of the empirical information obtained³, the possible and emerging risks of discrimination, which would most strongly affect certain groups and communities, are identified.

Profiles of discriminators and vulnerable groups

The carried out analysis shows the following trends: the profile of those who feel they are vulnerable and discriminated (nearly 14% of the total sample) is:

- Roma people
- Unemployed people
- Individuals with low incomes
- Groups with basic and primary education
- Young adults between 25 to 28 years
- Individuals without national health insurance

In this sense, discrimination is a challenge to social inclusion and it relates to:

- Lack of Economic Growth
- Low wages

³ The statistical analysis was made by Prof. Kaloyan Haralampiev from Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski".

- Increasing labor market segregation of: a highly skilled and paid segment and low-paid, atypical employment, which implies poverty.
- A diverse and sustainable profile of poverty;
- Regional imbalances in quality of life.

On this basis, the following indicators were formulated to measure the risk of discrimination:

- Ethnos
- Income
- Unemployment
- Health and access to health services
- Access to inclusive education
- Participation in the institutional life of the community.

We consistently present in detail the groups most affected by discrimination, according to the self-assessment approach:

Unemployed, low-income and poor people

This is the group with the largest number. Here are some of its features:

- More than 60% of the sample self-identifies as placed in the poorer part of the rich-poor scale, with over 75% of those with primary education and 47% of those with basic education identifying as poor.
- Serious income difficulties are faced by: a) 75.5% of the self-identified as Roma; b) 1/3 of the residents living in a small town and those living in the villages.
- Among those not working, 10% are unemployed and with an inactive registration in the Job Centres (one third of whom are Roma); 27.9% performed work for which they were not paid, and 30.2% performed overtime work for which they were not paid. 46% have worked without a contract with an employer, most often this happened among those without education, followed by those with primary education. Two-thirds of the unemployed Roma people say they have worked without a contract with an employer.
- The sources of income for the respondents' households are mainly wages or pensions. A small part also indicates an income from other sources, conditionally divided into the following categories: a) Income from people working abroad b) Financial support from children and relatives c) Obtaining benefits: d) Other sources and survival mechanisms (garbage bins).

Roma people

In all the regions surveyed, Roma people declared that they were discriminated and some reported physical abuse. It can be said that, in the context of the results, practically almost 87-89% of the Roma people in the sample say they have been subjected to some form of discrimination and, in many cases, to multiple discrimination. 21.2% of the Roma reported that they had been denied a doctor's examination, and the most common reason, according to them, was their belonging to an ethnic group other than the Bulgarian one. Unemployed Roma are the most emphatic in their assessments of being discriminated. Roma people, especially those without an education or with a low level of education, are the most distrustful of public institutions and their role of ensuring the right public order for the sake of preserving the peace of all citizens.

Disabled people

People with disabilities declare that they are discriminated because they can not fully participate in labor relations and structures as well as in social life in general. They are perceived as isolated due to a lack of working conditions, travel, difficulties of communication and poverty. In all surveyed regions, about 90% of the people with disabilities declare that they have been discriminated against or are at risk of discrimination.

People without a health insurance

This is a widespread group in Bulgarian society. *Difficult access to health and medical care is reported by the following individuals:* more than 50% of people without an education and employment; and 43% of the Roma.

In summary it can be said that manifests a generalized community of people with low education and unemployed people, mostly Roma, who declares risk of multiple discrimination. All of these groups share a common societal situation – their risk of social exclusion, which is often perceived and communicated as an exclusion from the labour market.

Poverty and social exclusion are complex phenomena with multiple manifestations. They concern not only the incomes and material well-being of the people but also their possibilities to actively participate in society. Poverty becomes a key characteristic of vulnerability. The poverty level is in direct correlation with the levels of socio-economic inequalities, which are also one of the main factors influencing the deepening of poverty⁴.

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, and it includes both a lack of resources to satisfy basic needs and a lack of conditions and prerequisites for a decent and fulfilling life, which in turn is due to a lack of possibilities for choice. People in a disadvantaged position in the labour market or outside the labour market are at greatest risk of falling into poverty. People in these positions are for example: unemployed youths up to 29 years of age, long-term unemployed people or ethnic minorities. It turns out that despite the target of the European Union (EU) to reduce the number of people experiencing poverty or social exclusion by 20 million until 2020, the number of people at risk of poverty has increased from 116 million in 2008 to 122 million in 2014, representing 24,4% of the population (EU-28). After a slight decrease in 2013, after three consecutive years of growth, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union remains almost stable in 2014, which is lower than the 2008 levels (23,8%)⁵.

Conditions of discrimination and vulnerability

An essential point in the analysis is the removal of the preconditions for discrimination, i.e. the environment – it becomes an incentive for discrimination in an institutional, political, organizational terms. It should be noted that the social environment and everyday life are becoming a serious factor for escalating different manifestations of discrimination. The differentiation of conditions and factors for discrimination revealed in several directions:

⁴ Joint report by the Commission and the Council on social inclusion, Council of the EU, (March 2004).

⁵ M. Lecerf, Poverty in the European Union. The crisis and its aftermath (Brussels: European Parliament Think Tank, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016).

The area of work

In this area, the discriminatory conditions that are experienced most often are related to the specific circumstances in which people's work activities occur:

- *Performing unpaid or non-contractual work*: A quarter of the respondents have performed overtime work for which they were not paid. Of these, 18.3% are people with secondary, university and college education. 23% of the respondents have worked without a contract for an employer, with 60% of the respondents having primary education and 39.5% basic education. 38.3% of Roma people and one third of households with a salary of less than BGN 499 per month have worked without a contract.
- *Difficulties in finding a job*, according to 35% of the respondents. The most common responses are: "I do not like the pay they offer," "I do not like the working conditions" and "I do not have enough contacts". As well as the following responses: "there is a financial crisis, it is hard to find work," "lack of experience", "lack of job offers in the area", "lack of work opportunities in the company", "lack of work experience". Another important factor is the raising of young children in the family: "employers do not hire women with young children".

The difficulties in finding a job are also associated with the following factors:

- Ethnicity - 56.5% of respondents believe that people of different ethnic backgrounds are less likely to find work than the rest of the population (majority).
- Sexual orientation - 37% of respondents are convinced that people with different sexual orientations are less likely to find a job.
- Disability - 86.6% believe that people with physical or mental disabilities are less likely to find work.
- Age - 78.7% believe that people over the age of 55 are less likely to find work.

The sphere of the workplace

In our opinion, the lack of healthy and safe working conditions, non-compliance by employers with labor legislation, obstruction of individuals in the development of their careers, are various forms of discrimination in the work environment.

Factors of perceived discrimination in the workplace are conditionally differentiated as follows:

- Due to childcare, pregnancy, maternity: 6.7% of the female respondents mention that they have experienced discrimination in the workplace for being absent from work because of their children. 6.1% of the female respondents have felt wronged by an employer in terms of the opportunity for professional growth due to their maternity leave.
- Due to insufficient work experience
- Due to work-related reasons and a perceived bias in the service environment: "Personal bias and preferences of the boss," "personal treatment," "boss incompetence," "preference for people with family connections".

The sphere of social inclusion

What social inclusion means is for vulnerable groups to be integrated into society. These groups include disabled people (children, elderly people); lone parents; large families; unemployed people of working age (young people, long-term unemployed); people receiving

social assistance; people without or with a low level education and qualifications; Roma people; disabled people; women (unemployed, elderly women). In order to include these people in society, they have to be supported by different activities for which different institutions are responsible.

When asked to assess the quality of various social services offered to the needy in the community, 33.6% of the interviewed defined the social assistance service as "poor"; 29.8% see foster care as "poor", 34.7% perceive the social rehabilitation service as "poor"; 21.9% gave a poor assessment of social patronage. 44% of the respondents don't trust the institutions to ensure the proper public order and peace of mind for the citizens. About 24% are those who are in the opposite position and have a high trust in public order institutions.

The sphere of equal opportunities

One of the prevailing factors for discrimination is the lack of awareness of what rights one has when he/she is being discriminated. In a situation of discrimination, the least informed about their rights are the unemployed, pensioners, people with low education. Most Roma people report a lack of awareness on the subject.

The low level-educated, the unemployed and the disabled, young people (under 17) and a significant proportion of the people living in Sofia are the least informed about where to file a complaint in a situation of discrimination. An appeal against discrimination has been submitted mostly by representatives of the Bulgarian ethnic group, living in large cities, followed by representatives of the Turkish and the Roma ethnic group.

The most frequent witnesses of discrimination in an educational environment (school or university) have been Bulgarians from small and big cities, currently employed. The subjects of discrimination in the educational environment have been both Bulgarian and Roma.

Relations with public institutions

In general, people with primary, basic and no education believe that public institutions do not treat them fairly, and this sample is mainly made up of unemployed and disabled people.

People without an education, those with primary education, the unemployed and those with low incomes give a low assessment of social assistance.

The social assistant service is assessed as poor by 40% of the disabled and the unemployed.

The social home patronage service is assessed as poor by 48% of the representatives of the Roma community.

When communicating with employees of the Job Centers, the following groups have felt the most discriminated against: people with a low monthly income; Roma people; people aged 44 to 57.

When communicating with social service representatives, the following groups have felt discriminated against the most often: based on ethnicity - the Roma people; based on education - people without an education or with primary education.

When communicating with the police, the following groups of people have felt the most discriminated against: people with basic education; unemployed people; those living in small towns.

It can be said that indicators that allow profiling of the type of discrimination and vulnerability, its degree, nature and sphere of manifestation prove that these pointers are working, adequate and rational throughout this study. It is precisely the results obtained that justify the repeated and systematic use of the proposed indicators in order to monitor and take into account the change in the state of discrimination and the risk of it in different groups and communities as well as in the different spheres of our society.

Emerging issues

There are several emerging issues of the effects of discrimination and the growing vulnerability of social groups. One of the most common is segregation, which is usually spatially defined and means the separation of social groups on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion. Segregation can be forced and voluntary in order to protect and strengthen community and social identity. Voluntary segregation is related to the consolidation of intra-group ties and interests and can be found in the Roma minority. Voluntary segregation creates a group protection mechanism, security and ethnic preservation and shows the importance of ethnic identity for the minority.

Another consequence of discrimination is an increase in social distances between ethnic groups in a national context. Social distances are an indicator of interethnic attitudes and relations, the strength of ethnicity and the degree of favoritism of the own group at the expense of others. There is an increase in the distances of the majority to the Roma community in Bulgarian conditions.

Conclusions

The summaries show the variance of the phenomenon of "discrimination", the fact that it is present in contemporary Bulgarian society, that groups and people who are affected by discrimination are a part of the social environment, and that they make up a share that is not small. The significance of this article is to be found in the comprehension and systematisation of information obtained, based on the empirical study conducted; this information is multifaceted and robust, addressing the different aspects of the risk of discrimination, the forms of discrimination and the predisposition of vulnerable groups.

Obtaining objective information allows the conclusions to be linked to equal opportunities, social inclusion and non-discrimination policies because an awareness of discrimination and the profiling of vulnerable groups requires adequate measures to be identified in the policy plan, a balanced approach to risk groups to be undertaken, as well as their engagement with the planning process to be enhanced.

A significant step forward in social inclusion is the eagerness to implement renewed patterns and good practices from the global experience. Roma educational inclusion policies seek to modernize the educational system (in regard to equal chances for minority pupils) through enhancing the responsibilities of all actors alongside the process. In line with that, consistent educational policies are regularly re-initiated given that so far these instruments have been, to a lesser extent, coordinated and resourceful. In the recent years a series of policies and measures have been introduced aiming at overcoming vulnerability and social

exclusion. The programs are aimed at making paths to the labour market in order to improve the life of youth and especially of vulnerable young people and create conditions for their development.

National Reform Program "Bulgaria 2020" set the objective of reducing the share of early school leavers under 11% by benefitting from the governmental budget and the structural funds.

The program focuses on:

- Opportunities for Vocational Education and Qualification;
- Opportunities for inclusion in the labor market;
- Effective support for socially disadvantaged people;
- Development of cross-sectoral services for social inclusion;
- Interaction between the institutions and the non-governmental sector;
- Providing an accessible environment for people with disabilities;
- Improving the quality of life in specialized institutions;
- Access to quality health care and care. The most vulnerable group in this regard continues to be the Roma community.
- Improving housing conditions for vulnerable groups.

Another policy document is *Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and students from ethnic minorities (2015-2020)*. It formulates the following aims: ensuring complete socialization of children and students from ethnic minorities; ensuring their equal access to quality education; promoting intercultural education and preserving and developing the cultural identity of children and students from ethnic minorities. The Strategy envisages the following activities: working with parents to ensure greater interest in and commitment; attracting young people with higher education from ethnic minorities as teachers; providing additional qualification of pedagogical specialists to work in a multicultural educational environment; conducting of extracurricular work, combined with the traditions of the various ethnic groups; support students from vulnerable ethnic communities for continued their education after compulsory school age, including higher education; and dissemination of good practices for preservation and promotion of cultural traditions of ethnic communities through modern technologies.

Combining measures to access the labour market, providing quality social services and adequate income provision is a social inclusion approach that covers the entire life cycle of a person and contributes to the prevention of intergenerational transmission of poverty. However, it is indisputable that, in order to achieve these objectives, it is necessary to develop economic activities with the potential to create new jobs and achieve sustainable economic growth. Providing access to services and, above all, access to basic health, education and social services is another key instrument for overcoming the consequences of poverty and social exclusion through the implementation of measures within a single integrated and effective approach.

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