

active cooperation and works effectively with 10 Roma nurses, doctor's assistants and physicians from different areas of the country who provide permanent assistance to the project. We hope that the network of Roma health mediators would be gradually expanded and would contribute to improving the health services available to the Roma community.

SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

ADDRESSING ROMA HEALTH ISSUES

In the last few years many NGOs carried out a number of successful projects targeted to Roma health. Others are currently being realized. We are convinced that everyone addressing Roma health issues would find it useful to learn more about the experience of their colleagues. This could inspire ideas for new projects and programs, as well as foster new partnerships.

Reproductive Health of Roma Population in Bulgaria

The Experience of the Bulgarian Family Planning Association (BFPA)

Reproductive health, like all other aspects of health, presents a problem for the Roma community. This is reflected in the demographic indices and the health status indicators of Roma population. The key indicators – life expectancy, child mortality, abortion rate – are far from satisfactory even at the background of the quite pessimistic reproductive health status of the country's population in general. We should note here that all data are relative, different sources provide disparate information, and no one seems ready to stand behind any conclusive figures. Even the very number of Roma in the country is subject to debate. Anyone who has ever addressed Roma issues knows that the number of Roma population in different sources and statistics varies between 300,000 and 800,000 (the difference could be even higher). Under these circumstances it is very difficult to differentiate the indicators reflecting the reproductive health status of Roma. The data cited below are taken from statistical handbooks published by the National Institute of Statistics, which is considered to be the most serious source of statistical information. They have been analyzed based on the experience of the Bulgarian Family Planning Association, which has a history of working with special needs groups like the Roma community.

The mortality rate among Roma is higher than the average for the country, especially for women in reproductive age, up to 39 years, and for men above 45 years. Child mortality has varied in the last few years. In 1999 for example it was 14.6 per 1000 nationally, while in rural areas, and especially in areas with predominant Roma population, it was twice as high (27 per 1000 for Sliven).

Reproductive Indicators

In spite of the general decline in the birth rate and the negative population growth, Roma families still tend to have four or more children. The lower the education level of parents, the higher the number of children, which leads to the familiar vicious circle: early marriage–early dropout from school–early first birth–numerous births with virtually no interval between them–no information on contraception and prevention–unemployment–poverty–lack of education and opportunities. Vital issues such as breastfeeding, proper nutrition, malformations, etc. also present a problem.

Given the low level of education among Roma and the behavioral patterns heavily influenced by traditions and information blackout, one would assume that the percentage of Roma who use modern contraception is low, probably not higher than 15%. For decades the only, highly unreliable, method for preventing pregnancy has been the coitus interruptus.