

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE FAMILIES IN BULGARIA: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

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SUMMARY

Family support services are of crucial importance for families from vulnerable groups in order to ensure their normal access to the educational, health and social systems and to protect the child's best interest in parenting. The aim of this paper is to review the key challenges in effectively delivering family services to vulnerable families in Bulgaria through a discussion of the main barriers and facilitators in family support provision. The analysis is based on the data from a small-scale survey including online survey with 40 organizations providers of family services; interviews with 15 professionals working in these organizations and a group discussion with the services providers from the Community Center for Early Childhood Development and Parental Support "Nadezhda" in the city of Burgas, Bulgaria.

The main difficulties that the professionals came across in their work concerned convincing families to use the services, overcoming parents' unwillingness to cooperate with professionals and denying or neglecting the child's problem and handling the discrepancy between user's expectations and delivered services.

The survey data also outlined the proactive solutions and the directions for improvement in the quality of services: development of interaction and partnership with families from vulnerable groups; networking with other institutions and organizations to provide non-fragmented services; increasing the number of educational and health mediators that will increase parents' motivation and encourage services take-up; providing integrated services in the community through mobile groups and fieldwork; overcoming prejudices and discriminative attitudes toward marginalized groups and raising the level of awareness of families toward delivered services and their effects on child's wellbeing.

Keywords: *family support policy, service provision, vulnerable families, providers' opinions, barriers and facilitators in service provision, Bulgaria*

Serviciile de sprijin pentru familie sunt de o importanță crucială pentru familiile din grupurile vulnerabile, pentru a le asigura accesul normal la sistemele educaționale, de sănătate și sociale și pentru a proteja interesul superior al copilului în educație parentală. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a revizui provocările cheie în furnizarea eficientă a serviciilor familiale familiilor vulnerabile din Bulgaria, printr-o discuție despre principalele bariere și facilitatori în furnizarea de sprijin pentru familie. Analiza se bazează pe datele dintr-un sondaj la scară mică, inclusiv un sondaj online cu 40 de organizații furnizori de servicii pentru familie; interviuri cu 15 profesioniști care lucrează în aceste organizații și o discuție de grup cu furnizorii de servicii de la Centrul comunitar pentru dezvoltarea timpurie a copilăriei și sprijin parental „Nadezhda” din orașul Burgas, Bulgaria.

Principalele dificultăți întâmpinate de profesioniști în activitatea lor au vizat convingerea familiilor să folosească serviciile, depășirea ne dorinței părinților de a coopera cu profesioniștii și negarea sau neglijarea problemei copilului și gestionarea discrepanței dintre așteptările utilizatorilor și serviciile furnizate.

Datele sondajului au evidențiat, de asemenea, soluțiile pro active și direcțiile de îmbunătățire a calității serviciilor: dezvoltarea interacțiunii și parteneriatului cu familiile din grupurile vulnerabile; crearea de rețele cu alte instituții și organizații pentru a oferi servicii nefragmentate; creșterea numărului de mediatori educaționali și sanitari care vor spori motivația părinților și vor încuraja utilizarea serviciilor; furnizarea de servicii integrate în comunitate prin grupuri mobile și lucru pe teren; depășirea prejudecăților și atitudinilor discriminatorii față de grupurile marginalizate și creșterea nivelului de conștientizare a familiilor față de serviciile furnizate și efectele acestora asupra bunăstării copilului.

Cuvinte cheie: *politică de sprijin familial, furnizarea de servicii, familii vulnerabile, opiniile furnizorilor, bariere și facilitatori în furnizarea de servicii, Bulgaria*

Службы поддержки семьи имеют решающее значение для семей из уязвимых групп, чтобы обеспечить им нормальный доступ к системам образования, здравоохранения и социальной защиты, а также защитить интересы ребенка в воспитании детей. Целью данной статьи является рассмотрение ключевых проблем в эффективном предоставлении семейных услуг уязвимым семьям в Болгарии путем обсуждения основных препятствий и факторов, способствующих оказанию поддержки семьям. Анализ основан на данных небольшого опроса, в том числе онлайн-опроса с участием 40 организаций-поставщиков семейных услуг; интервью с 15 специалистами, работающими в этих организациях, и групповая дискуссия с поставщиками услуг Общественного центра раннего развития детей и поддержки родителей «Надежда» в городе Бургас, Болгария.

Основные трудности, с которыми столкнулись специалисты в своей работе, касались убеждения семей воспользоваться услугами, преодоления нежелания родителей сотрудничать со специалистами, отрицания или игнорирования проблемы ребенка, а также устранения несоответствия между ожиданиями пользователей и оказанными услугами.

Данные опроса также обозначили инициативные решения и направления улучшения качества услуг: развитие взаимодействия и партнерства с семьями из уязвимых групп; создание сетей с другими учреждениями и организациями для предоставления нефрагментированных услуг; увеличение количества посредников в сфере образования и здравоохранения, которые повысят мотивацию родителей и будут стимулировать пользование услугами; предоставление интегрированных услуг на местном уровне посредством мобильных групп и работы на местах; преодоление предрассудков и дискриминационного отношения к маргинализированным группам и повышение уровня осведомленности семей о предоставляемых услугах и их влиянии на благополучие детей.

Ключевые слова: политика поддержки семьи, предоставление услуг, уязвимые семьи, мнения поставщиков, барьеры и факторы, способствующие предоставлению услуг, Болгария

INTRODUCTION

CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

State policy for child protection in Bulgaria was comprehensively formulated by the Child Protection Act, established and adopted in 2000. The law stipulates that the state provides care for children only in cases of lack of care by relatives, and the family remains a priority for child-rearing. Until the adoption of the Child Protection Act, there was no special law to regulate the rights of the child as provided for in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Bulgarian government in 1990. By-laws regulated the protection of the child in the absence of parental care.

The system of child protection functions through measures and social support in its two main forms: financial assistance or benefits in kind and social activities and services. Children at risk are a top priority for protection. The main institution in the country for implementing child protection policy is the Agency for

Social Assistance to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with child protection departments (CPD) as regional units in the 28 regions of the country. Alongside the state-run institutions, the NGO sector has a key role in setting social policy priorities and providing social services and advocacy campaigns to support children and families.

In the framework of child welfare reform in Bulgaria (Markova et al 2018), during the last decade child protection policy has been developed around the following priorities: reducing child poverty and creating social conditions for children's social inclusion; ensuring equal access to quality preschool and school education for all children; improving children's health and encouraging children's participation in forming and implementing policies related to their rights and responsibilities (UNICEF-BG 2019).

PRESSING GAPS IN SERVICE PROVISION IN BULGARIA

Despite some government-funded policies, programs and pilot projects aimed at improving parenting skills and knowledge, support for families and parents is fragmented and is not considered part of a broader family and children's policies (World Bank 2019). Additionally, the public debate is influenced by the resistance to parental policies and their effectiveness, expressed by part of the parental organizations (Nenova, Luleva, Kotzeva, 2023). Social services lack flexibility and sustainability, which can enable them to play a preventive and supportive role in limiting the risk of child poverty and social inclusion.

There are no systematic approaches to monitoring the needs of parents and their priority areas. Parents are not actively involved in monitoring the quality and management of ECEC services and school management through participation in public councils and surveys (Kotzeva, 2021; Todorova, 2019). Additionally, with a few exceptions like a national campaign "Being a father" as part of the international MenCare campaign in support of fatherhood¹, a proactive role of fathers in raising young children through their inclusion in the work of early child education and care (ECEC) services, public campaigns promoting shared parenting and having more male practitioners in supporting and teaching professions have been missing.

¹ <https://old.mencare.bg/za-kampaniata/>

CHILDREN IN NEED IN BULGARIA: AT THE HEART OF FAMILY POLICY AND SERVICE PROVISION

Bulgaria ranks among the EU countries with a very high percentage of child poverty (NSI, 2021). According to a UNICEF report from January 2023 (UNICEF-BG, 2023, p. 49), 24% of children in the European Union during the 2021 year were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and Bulgaria was among the top three countries (together with Romania and Spain) in the EU with the highest percentage of children at risk – 33%. Children in need are defined as children who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as children who are highly vulnerable due to specific factors (UNICEF-BG, 2022, p. 31). The action plan of the Bulgarian government (Action plan, 2022, p. 3) based on the European Child Guarantee (ECG) outlines those children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria in 2021 were about 400 thousand. In the same document, it is pointed out that 90.3% of children from the Roma ethnic group live in material deprivation (deprived of at least 1 out of 13 measured indicators), while for children from the Bulgarian ethnic group, this percentage is lower: 26.3%. The goal of the national policies is a 50% reduction in the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Bulgaria till 2030 year.

According to the European Child Guarantee – the European Commission's document that states an overwhelming policy initiative to reduce child poverty in Europe, the main drivers are not only poverty per se but limited access to goods and services (EC, 2021). The ECG defines several groups of children at risk of poverty and different forms of disadvantage: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with mental health issues; children with migrant backgrounds; children in the alternative, particularly institutional care; children with minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly Roma and children in precarious family situations. The latter group of families refers to a multidimensional set of risks of poverty comprising living in a single-earner household, living with a parent with disabilities, living in a household where there are mental health problems

or long-term illness, living in a household where there is substance abuse or domestic violence; children of a Union citizen who has moved to another Member State while the children themselves remained in their Member State of origin (so-called Skype-children), children having a teenage mother or being a teenage mother and children having an imprisoned parent.

Child poverty is more widespread in large families, in families where parents possess a low level of education and are unemployed, among single parents and families vulnerable to different risks.

While risks of poverty are relevant for all the above-mentioned groups, the highest levels of poverty or social exclusion are observed among children living in Roma families and families with precarious situations (UNICEF-BG, 2022). While 20.1% of children of Bulgarian origin live at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the share of poor children in the Roma community is 87.6% (UNICEF-BG, 2022, p. 45). The main drivers for poverty are present in the Roma community: large families, parents with primary or less than primary education and households with very low work intensity (less than 20%), implying unemployed parents. As a result of poverty, Roma children are largely excluded from ECEC services, they are more likely to leave school early, live in overcrowded dwellings with poor housing conditions and have no effective access to healthcare (RECI+, 2020).

The experience in different countries indicates that family support services and measures of social protection are key elements for the prevention of and coping with multiple risks for the proper physical and psycho-social development of children in those families (Abela et al, 2021; Thévenon, 2020). Family support services are especially important for parents from vulnerable groups who have limited access to material resources and experience severe constraints in approaching educational, health and social services (Acquah & Thévenon, 2020).

RESEARCH AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this paper is to review the key challenges in effectively delivering family services to vulnerable families in Bulgaria through a discussion of the main barriers and good practices in family support provision. Our main hypothesis is based on the cultural specificities and low socioeconomic status of disadvantaged families, mainly from the Roma community, as beneficiaries of social services. We suppose that family support

providers will face barriers with access to needy families and their motivation to be included in the services. The main challenge for a practitioner's effective social work will be to build trustful and long-term relations with the parents and community members.

The analysis is based on the data from a small-scale survey².

²The survey has been funded by the National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science within the project "National Review on policies and practices in family support services", Co N K17-06-KOCT-9 / 07.10.2020

The survey is grounded on a mix-methods methodology and includes:

- *Online survey with 40 organizations providers of family services;*
- *Interviews with 15 professionals working in these organizations;*
- *Group discussion with the services providers from the Community Center for Early Childhood Development and Parental Support "Nadezhda" in the city of Burgas, Bulgaria.*

The main topics of the survey and the focus group discussion concern users' level of information and access to services, ways of service implementation, including case management, participant responsiveness, barriers encountered by professionals in providing services to families of vulnerable groups and ways of integration between delivery organizations and local institutions.

The online survey was administered in a Google Forms format in the winter of 2022 through personal emails to around 100 NGOs that provided services in the country. Finally, 40 organizations completed the questionnaire fully. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in the period November 2021 - March 2022.

MAIN RESULTS

PROFILES OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

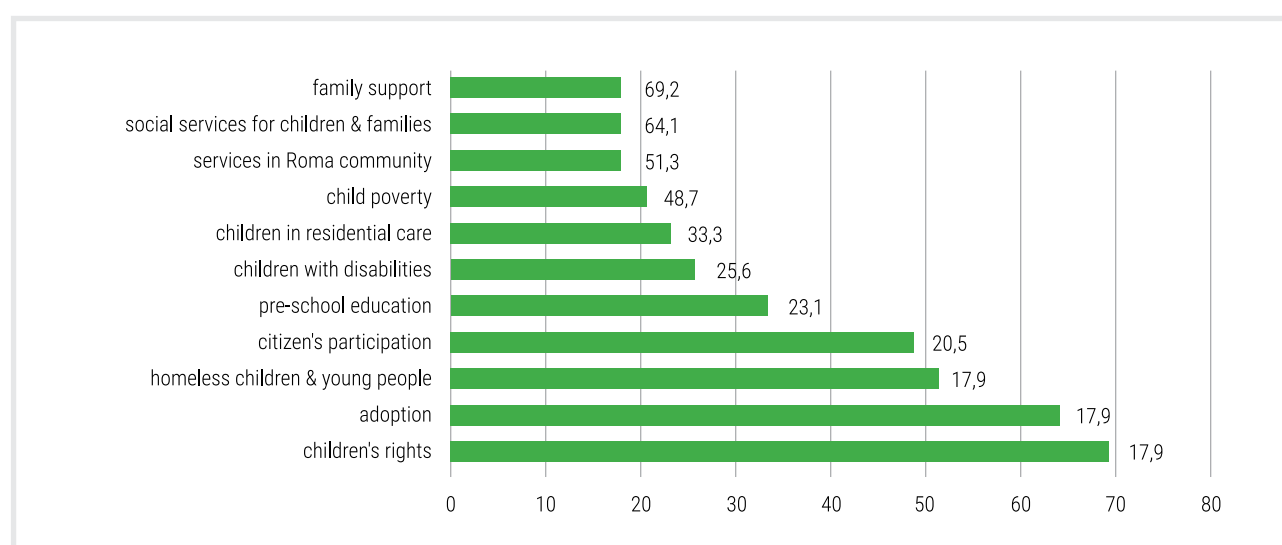
Most of the organizations that filled in the questionnaire were experienced providers with more than 5 years of activities in delivering services in the community, situated in the biggest cities of the country like Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Pernik, etc. Their staff is multidisciplinary and includes predominantly social workers, psychologists, mediators and special pedagogies. When naming their services the organizations pointed out their facilities as Center for community support; Center for social rehabilitation and integration; Family support Centers for early child development; Social enterprises for young people from institutions and problematic family environments, Centers for mobile work and with homeless children, Centers for working with human trafficking and domestic violence, etc.

The questionnaire started with questions about the main areas of service provision and the most targeted users of service delivery³.

Data in *Fig. 1* present the area of the services provided by the organizations in the sample. Two-thirds of the organizations indicated their work as services in family support (69,2%) and social services for children and families (64,1%). Nearly half of the organizations mentioned that they worked with Roma families (51,3%) and that their main priority was child poverty (48,7%). One-third of organizations were engaged with services toward children in residential care (33,3%) and one-fourth – toward children with disabilities (25,6%) and preschool education (23,1%). Less than 20% reported that they were engaged in advocacy of children's and youth's rights.

Figure 1.

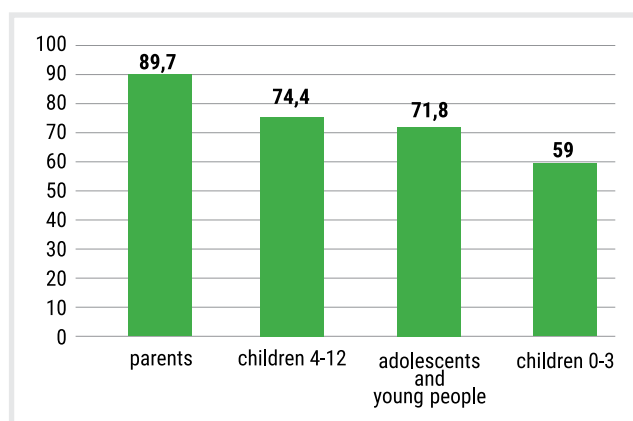
Area of service provision (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

³In the questions with multiple answers the total sum of answers exceeds 100%.

Figure 2.
Users of service provision (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

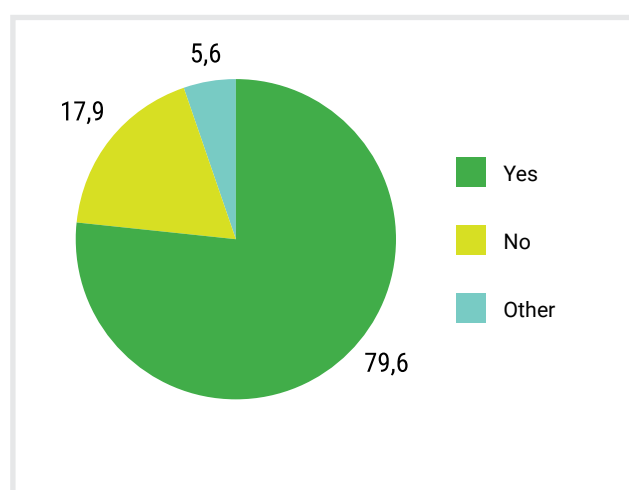
Data in Fig. 2 show the main target groups of users whose needs were referred to by the organizations: parents were the main target group (89,7%), the next groups were children aged 4-12 (74,5%), adolescents and young people (71,8%) and children aged 0-3 (59%) (Fig. 2).

The organizations in the sample provided a wide range of services including family counseling services, in-home supports (including mobile work), referrals to GPs, pediatricians and other social institutions, food access (meal vouchers and vouchers for dairy kitchen, etc.), parent education related to healthy child development, early learning, effective parental skills, early child prevention of abandonment, drop-outs from school, delivery of basic material resources (clothing, diapers, hygiene items, etc.).

ACCESS TO AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES

Key issues in family support services concern the issues of how to find out and reach the most needful families, how to spread information about services and how to ensure that families in need are informed about them. Answers to the question “Does your organization have a well-established procedure for assessing the service needs of families and children?” showed that a vast proportion of organizations (76,9%) reported positively about the procedure of reaching out new users and less than one-fifth of organizations (17,9%) gave a negative answer. (Fig. 3)

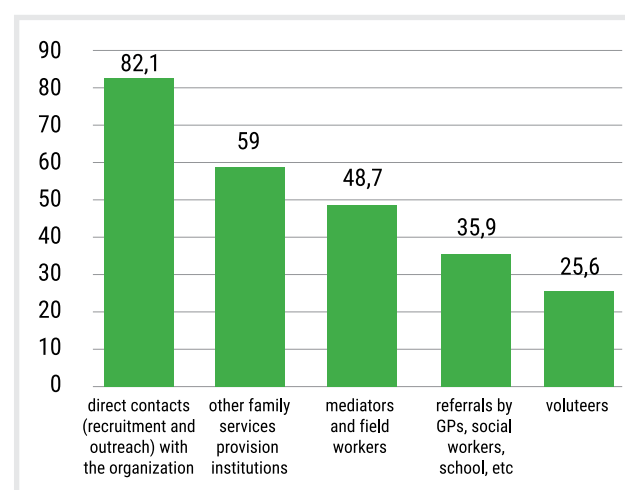
Figure 3.
Well-established procedure for assessing families and children's needs (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

In response to the question “How do new users reach the organization to use the service?” the providers defined a wide variety of channels for access to beneficiaries among which the most spread are through direct contacts (recruitment and outreach) – 82,1%, through other family services institutions – 59%, through mediators and community workers – 48,7% and through referrals by GPs, social workers, school, etc – 35,9%. The organizations rely on volunteers' help in 25,6% of cases of searching for new users. (Fig. 4).

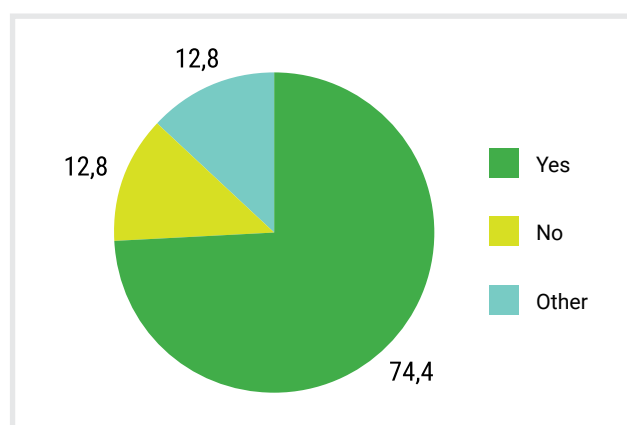
Figure 4.
Channels for new users' access to the organization (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

Case management is a key mechanism to provide effective family support services in order to guarantee better communication, information and advocacy between provider and family that helps to minimize bureaucratic procedures. The predominant proportion of organizations (74,4%) gave a positive answer to the question “Does your organization have case managers, providing support to families?”. 12,8% of the organizations did not use case management and 12,8% gave other responses like “the whole team is involved in the project”, “personal mentors play this role”, etc. (Fig.5).

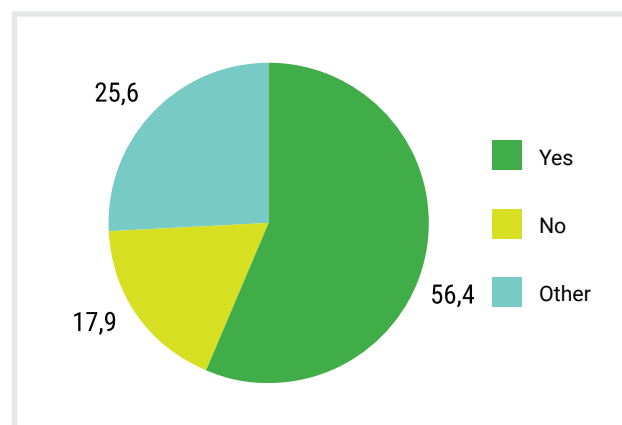
Figure 5.
Case workers at the organization



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

The next question concerns the providers' experience with home visits “Do case workers visit families in their home to assess their needs (except from a provision of mobile services)?” More than half of the providers (56,4%) implemented case management work by visiting families in their homes, 17,9% visited homes in special circumstances and 25,6% did not offer home visits (Fig. 6).

Figure 6.
Home visits of caseworkers (%)



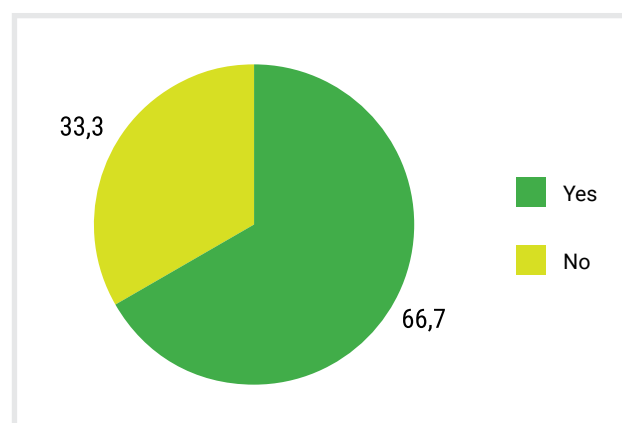
Source: Calculations based on the survey data

FAMILIES' REFUSALS AND SERVICES USE STOP

One of the biggest challenges for practitioners working with families and children is keeping families motivated to use the services in the long term and motivating them not to refuse to be served. It is part of the adaptability of interventions to a local context and to the specific needs of families in need. Knowledge of the cultural norms of users at individual and community levels and the communication skills of the providers are crucial for the successful recruitment and retention in services for families in a disadvantaged situation.

The answers to the question “Do you have cases of a user refusing to receive service?” confirmed that refusals and stop using services were a reality faced by two-thirds of the organizations and respectively for one-third of them these practices did not exist or rarely happened. (Fig.7).

Figure 7.
Families stop using services (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

In an open-ended question, the respondents were asked to define the most common reasons that stood behind the users' refusals. The respondents gave a variety of answers that were categorized into the following explanations:

First of all, the reluctance of users to receive support is related to parents' prejudices and assumptions: parents misunderstood the meaning of cooperation with professionals; parents denied or neglected the seriousness of the child's problem; parents did not see rapid progress in their children's development as a result of the professional assistance provided or their expectations have not been confirmed; parents did not want to make efforts and cooperate with the teams,

parents complained about the intensity of work; parents expected a material benefit in order to cooperate;

Second, often users did not give a specific reason for the refusal; or they changed their address through moving to another settlement or to another country or their children were grown-ups;

Third, users felt that they had resources and could cope with the child's problems on their own and without additional support; or parents had no motivation and discipline to follow practitioners' instructions, or parents were afraid that the social units/workers would take away their children and place them in other families.

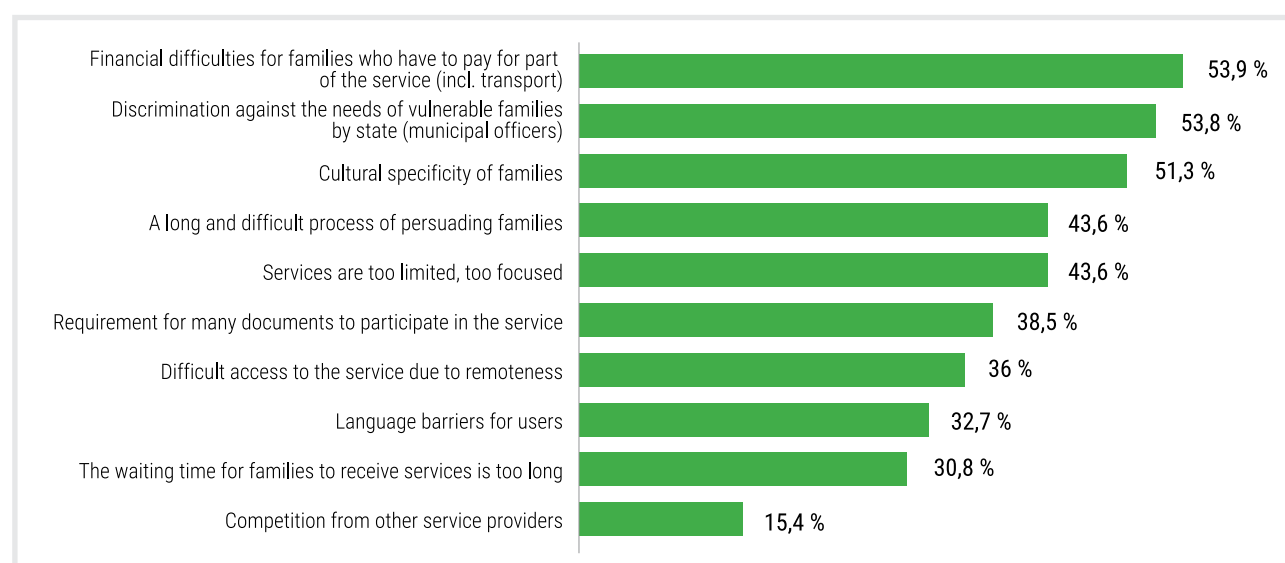
THE MAIN BARRIERS TO PRACTITIONERS' WORK

Having in mind the main reasons for users to refuse or stop using the services, it was interesting to look at how the practitioners grasp the barriers in their work answering the question 'To what extent does your organization face the following barriers when working with families and children?' The respondents were offered a set of barriers to be assessed according to 5 point scale: 'not at all', 'poorly', 'moderate', 'to a large extent' and 'completely'.

Combining the three answers 'completely', 'to a large extent' and 'moderate' we ranged the barriers as follows. The strongest barriers shared by half of the respondents were: Financial difficulties for families who have to pay for part of the service (including transport) – 53.9%; Discrimination against the needs of vulnerable

families by state (municipal officers) – 53.8%; Cultural specificities of families – 51.3%. The next group of barriers was supported by 30-44% of the respondents: A long and difficult process of persuading families – 43.6%; Services are too limited, too focused – 43.6%; Requirement for many documents to participate in the service – 38.5%; 6. Difficult access to the services due to remoteness – 36%; Language barriers for users – 32.7%; The waiting time for receiving services is too long – 30.8%. Competition from other service providers received the lowest weight in the respondents' range of barriers – 15.4% (Fig. 8). The mentioned grading of barriers shows obviously the directions for working with vulnerable families toward the elimination of the financial burden of services and reducing discriminatory attitudes and practices among practitioners in state and private service provision.

Figure 8.
Barriers in the providers' work with families and children (%)



Source: Calculations based on the survey data

GOOD PRACTICES IN SERVICE PROVISION

Good practices in providing support services to families and children were explored in terms of the ways that organizations use to increase the trust of service users in professionals and to keep the users longer as beneficiaries. The results showed that the trust of families in service providers is developing due to the positive effects of the services provided, the key is the effectiveness of the assistance provided.

Answering the open-ended question: "What methods does your organization use to retain users of the service, for example, you provide feedback to families to share common ratings and goals?", the providers' responses were arranged as follows: non-judgmental, supportive attitude (i.e. acceptance and understanding); equality, respect and partnership with parents in assessing needs and preparing the care plan – signing a contract for the provision of services (i.e. voluntariness of participation); constantly informing parents and providing objective feedback at every stage of the joint work; applying a holistic approach, striving to meet all the needs of families from vulnerable social groups in one place

(in community centers) through a multidisciplinary team; use of mobile groups – fieldwork; by providing social-household and health support (material – food, medicines, hygiene materials, etc.); information and work to increase motivation.

The answers to the next open-ended question about the measures of organizations to provide more effective access to beneficiaries outlined the areas in which to focus the efforts of professionals in the future: outreach work through mobile groups consisting of different professionals who provide services to those in need directly in the community; increasing the number of mediators; organizations providing services to become more recognizable and to work to increase their authority among the vulnerable families; promoting programs for working with families through various information campaigns, open days, etc. improving the quality of services so that working with children and families is more effective; development of partnership with the education system.

BARRIERS (FREEFORM COMMENTS FROM THE GROUP DISCUSSION)

A group discussion with specialists from the community Center for Early Childhood Development and Parental Support „Nadezhda“ shed more light on the barriers in the practitioners' work. The Center is placed next to one of the municipality kindergartens in the city of Burgas, Bulgaria. The municipal kindergarten and the Center are in a district neighboring the Roma community settlements. The Center's team consists of 15 professionals and additionally, the Center uses the help of a dentist, a pediatrician and health mediators.

The Community Center has accumulated extensive experience – since its establishment in May 2016, integrated services for early childhood development have been provided to over 1600 children with disabilities or from vulnerable social groups and to over 900 current and future parents. This Center is one of the 66 Centers developed in the country within the framework of the two large-scale national projects "Social Inclusion Project" (2008-2015) and "Services for Early Child Development" (2016-2022) funded by the World Bank. These Centers have developed and implemented family and children's support services with priorities on creating an opportunity to raise children in a family environment, preventing the abandonment of children and their placement in institutional care, developing parental skills, preventing children from dropping out of the educational system and increasing their readiness to participate in it; prevention of intergenerational transmission of poverty and improved access to health care. (Services for early childhood development, 2020; SIP, n.d.)

Six persons from the community Center "Nadezhda" personnel took part in the group discussion. Two social workers, two mediators, the psychologist and the manager of the Center's team discussed their work with the research team. The discussion lasted 2,5 hours and was recorded and later transcribed. One of the main conclusions drawn from the practitioners' experience was about the restrictions coming from the cultural background of the families. The participants in the focus group pointed out difficulties they faced in their work with Roma parents: parents' denial of a child's problem, their non-involvement in prescribed activities for the child at home, their distrust of professionals and their unrealistic expectations about fast outcomes.

"The child is fine" – this is a frequent answer of the mother; at first, they deny the child's problem, but then they sign a work agreement, despite it they may give up... (mediator, Community Center "Nadezhda")

Parents are very enthusiastic, but when it comes time for work – they pull back. (social worker, Community Center "Nadezhda")

Next, the practitioners put an emphasis on restrictions related to the child's problem, in particular, an increase of children with autism spectrum disorders and with communication problems and emotional neglect of children by their parents.

Today, neglect in children has a different character: children are fed, dressed, but lack emotional support,

communication and care. (psychologist, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

The specialists talked comprehensively about the other group of barriers related to the cultural specificities of the Roma community. They pointed out that the low education and illiteracy of most of the parents resulted in the spread of negative attitudes, fears and prejudices toward specialists and people outside the community. The Roma family has preserved patriarchal relations and the opinions of the young parents are often denigrated by the older generation. The authority of old people and particularly mother-in-law is crucial in cases of decisions about a child's way of raising and development. The practitioners talked about their skills to motivate the influential people in the community, including mothers-in-law without whose consent the young mothers couldn't do anything about their child:

The Roma are very influenced by others, they began to take the children to the kindergarten and the change is immediately visible: the children become cleaner and neater. The same grandmother who was against now is the first to pay the fee, because the grandmother has found out that she is honored and she feels motivated to take the grandchildren to kindergarten. (social worker, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

Reflecting on the dynamics of their communication with parents, the professionals assessed it in a positive way and concluded that parents turned out to be more accepting of the support services:

There is a huge progress in the attitude of parents – they are looking for us themselves, they are submitting applications, “unclogged”, we were wondering how to make sure that parents recognize us. (team manager, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

In a talk on the Center health prevention program, the professionals outlined the key role of mobile work and home visits to reach out the families in need:

What does health prevention involve? 90% is a mobile work – to find people without GPs and children who are served by GPs without a pediatric specialty to be sent to a pediatrician; how young mothers should take care of their child, because they look at them in old conservative ways – using fat, salt, tightening with ropes, etc. Still, there is a change. (psychologist, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

The professionals were aware that because of the multidimensional character of poverty the Community Center should be responsive to a variety of Roma families' needs:

There is also a Family Center at the Community Center – in an apartment in a neighboring block, where the mother can leave her child for 2 hours free of charge while looking for work or submitting documents. The kindergarten seems scary to them as an institution, so the family center has the function of an intermediate link between the home and the kindergarten. (team manager, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

In conclusion, in order to generalize the Community Center recommendations in regard to social assistance the professionals indicated three main facilitators to effective and long-term work with the families: provision of integrated services with multidisciplinary personnel, irreplaceable role of community mediators doing outreach and placement of the service provision center near the community (in the local kindergarten). The team manager outlined the paramount role of the kindergarten to find out and access parents in need:

And we decided through the parent meetings in the kindergarten – i.e. through the teachers. And there was a boom [of parents' referrals to the Center] – it began to be passed on between mothers. But for 1-2 years it was as if we were gone, and besides, the teachers did not allow us in their 'kitchen'... (team manager, Community Center “Nadezhda”)

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Family support services are of crucial importance for families from vulnerable groups in order to ensure their normal access to the educational, health and social systems and to protect the child's best interest in parenting (Asmussen, 2017; Guerreiro & Sedletzki, 2016; Riding, 2021; McGregor & Devaney, 2020, p. 284) warn about complexity “to get the balance between responding to needs for prevention and early intervention and needs for protection and legal intervention”.

Professionals in place who deliver services to vulnerable families are key factors in ensuring an effective

integration of marginalized families from the Roma community. Their efforts are devoted to tackling the main problems of disadvantaged families like child abandonment and neglect of childcare. In granting their professional support (knowledge and skills) to child-raising in Roma families, the practitioners try to implement child protection policies at the local level, thus strengthening social services provision provided by the state-run Agency for Social Assistance.

The Bulgaria Report on Early Childhood Inclusion+ (RECI+, 2020) mentions the main challenges in service provision for marginalized families: insufficient

resources for service availability, unequal access of Roma children to health, education and social services, insufficient quality of ECEC, health, and social services that hinder Roma's inclusion, a piecemeal approach and lack of integrated and coordinated services, need for active parents' engagement with the ECEC providers. Parallel to structural barriers, the report also outlines discriminative attitudes that Roma faces in all areas including social services provision.

The survey on service providers' opinions which was conducted among 40 NGOs gives first-hand information about the constraints inherent in this field of work, most of which have been addressed by the RECI+ report. The survey results confirm our hypothesis that the main difficulties the professionals came across in their work concern convincing families to use the services, overcoming parents' unwillingness to cooperate with professionals and denying or neglecting the child's problem, overall, handling the discrepancy between user's expectations and delivered services. Parents are the main providers of care for their children, in this sense, the providers' skills to encourage parents' active involvement in services are of crucial importance for the effective impact of services on a child's development. The previous studies (Yossifov, et. al. 2018) show that the most effective way to reach out and communicate with families from marginalized communities is through establishing partnership relations based on equal

respect and understanding and avoiding patronizing and didactic approaches. Our study results attest that the practitioners are aware of the cultural and language barriers as well as of discriminative attitudes that undermine their effective communication with Roma families. In this vein, increasing the number of Roma health and educational mediators and training programs with a focus on raising the status of the profession and qualifications to practice is crucial for the effective delivery of services. The case study with the Community Center 'Nadezhda' testifies that a multidisciplinary team of professionals, including community mediators is a valuable way to directly address Roma families through providing integrated services.

Alongside the challenges in family support provision, the survey data also outline the proactive solutions and the directions for improvement in the quality of services: development of interaction and partnership with families from vulnerable groups; networking with other institutions and organizations to provide non-fragmented services; increasing the number of educational and health mediators that will increase parents' motivation and encourage services take-up; providing integrated services in the community through mobile groups and fieldwork; overcoming prejudices and discriminative attitudes toward marginalized groups and raising the level of awareness of families toward delivered services and their effects on child's wellbeing.

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