



Chapter 5

The Working Conditions

Problems

Collectors say they face mainly three types of problems: (a) stigma, such as scolding, insults, maltreatment and violence; (b) bad conditions, mishaps and accidents; and (c) prohibitions. The problems are best described in their own words.

Scolding, insults, maltreatment and violence: “The citizens get angry when we disperse things around the solid waste cans. They are right; we sometimes do not take care either.” “They take aim at us with flower vases, eggs, bricks, with air guns. Children pelt us with potatoes and bags full of water. The aggression itself does not bother me, but if the child and the wife are with me, we take refuge. They are all drunkards or rascals.” “They aim at us intentionally from the buildings, they shove us and swear. They intentionally turn over our carts.” “The police maltreat those that have no registration.” “We sometimes have fights with the rival Collectors.” “We Gypsies do not quarrel over the containers. Whoever comes first, he collects, but the refugees stand in front of the warehouse and do not let anyone approach. They are despicable and dangerous. All the problems we have come from them.”

We asked Collectors what types of people pose the most problems for them. They said that all kinds of people harass them: ruffians and skinheads, ordinary people, and police. They claimed that ordinary people cause most of the problems. “I go with my bicycle, but a man comes out in front of me, ‘..... A time will come to chase you out too’.” “The drivers keep insulting us when you push your cart down the streets.” “In the Miljakovac district they swear and throw things at us, so we women don’t go alone to collect but rather together with men, or several of us women together.” “In the Konjarnik district, the rascals snatch the paper and the carts from us, so we don’t go at night anymore.” “Children urinate on us from buildings, but they are children, so we don’t complain to them.” “At night we don’t go collecting. There are big problems. I was once hit in the head with a stone by someone.” “Children throw empty bottles and eggs at us.” “Children say all kinds of things, swear and aim at us.” “Citizens shout all kinds of things, like ‘You Gypsies are dangerous’.”



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They say drunken people hurl insults at them, and skinheads attack and chase them. “It’s the crazy people who maltreat you.” “They throw bottles at us from a fence or a high story.” “From the bridge they throw bottles from their cars.” “In the evening we don’t go out because these rascals turn the carts over, and yet it’s the time when the shops close down and the cardboards are most numerous. Once I left my cart behind to let them destroy it, just to save my life. Fortunately, they were spotted by the police and it saved me.” “Some madmen had once chased me from Slavija Square to Sarajevska Street” (a distance of five city blocks).

Attacks against Roma in Belgrade, around Serbia and throughout Europe are common knowledge and may be increasing. Literature on this subject confirms what our discussion groups told us and confirms that most Roma who are attacked are poor; many are attacked while doing their various jobs in cities, such as peddling items on the street or scavenging. These attacks are usually carried out by a group of young males looking for some excitement, but occasionally by a single older male, and the attack begins with cursing the person’s Gypsy origins and his Gypsy mother. Cursing one’s mother is the worse way you can curse someone in Serbian society. Then the person is beaten up, sometimes until he falls unconscious. One incident reported to the European Roma Rights Council describes a typical incident:

“On April 17, 2002, Mr. Avdi Berisa, a 31-year-old Romani man from the Romani settlement Deponija in Belgrade, told MRC that at approximately 10:00 PM on an unspecified date in early February 2002, he was attacked by a group of approximately 10 non-Romani young men, while he was collecting scrap paper on 29 Novembar Street. The young men reportedly laughed at Mr. Berisa and cursed his ‘Gypsy mother’. According to Mr. Berisa, the young men then ordered him to throw away the paper he had collected in his cart, and one of the young men ordered him to drive them in his cart. Mr. Berisa reported to MRC that he did not resist because he was afraid that they would beat him up. Three of the young men then entered his cart, and he drove them around for about one hour, during which time the other young men took turns getting in the cart. According to Mr. Berisa, at the end of the hour, the non-Romani young men left. According to MRC, the incident was never reported to the police.”

Collectors said that they are sometimes harassed by police who accuse them of stealing. “When you find some good thing, the police first beat you and then you have to prove that you did not steal it.” “The police don’t let us work. When you drive they ask for your license and vehicle registration.” “The police take us to jail if they find goods that, according to them, were stolen.” “If you run into something good, the police accuse you first that the goods were stolen.” “They immediately take us to the investigation department. It’s a matter of luck to find someone who would acknowledge we haven’t stolen, but thanks to God - such people can be found.” “On one occasion I found computer keyboards. They were all in good order but were discarded, and yet they sent me into jail right away. The man who threw them out came to defend me; my wife found him and asked him to. He told them that they were all



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obsolete from a warehouse, so they got rid of them. It was indeed so, but I had already gotten a beating from the police. I even had to prove to them that I had been treated for alcoholism and cured and that I do not drink anymore. I gave them my health booklet.”

Most of the Collectors believe that they do not have any support or protection. They are exasperated by their situation and feel that nobody cares to help them. “Nobody takes us under his protection.” Still, others recognize the people of good will and quote the situations in which they get the support from them. “It’s the ordinary people that sometimes defend us. They say, ‘don’t bother them, they don’t offend you and don’t steal - they just collect.’” “Those who know us also protect us; they know we do this for a living.” “Sometimes individual citizens defend us, and yet, on other occasions they do not dare to. When dangerous people are around, they will beat up whoever defends us. They say to our defenders, “What’s the matter, is that Gypsy your brother?” “Gentlemen defend us, they shout from their windows to defend us, but it’s no use for these rascals.” “The women walking down the street defend us and tell the rascals to let us go, but sometimes even they do not dare to speak.” “There are good citizens also and even the police sometimes offer their hand to protect us.”

Bad conditions, mishaps and accidents: “Traffic accidents, you get hurt. The bin hurts your fingers, breaks them, sometimes the swivel top even captures your head if you are careless.” “It’s cold in the winter.” “Our problem is the smell, the cold, the wind, the winter, and also big heat in the summer.” “It’s not easy. We don’t have regular meals; we have to walk a lot. I can’t do any physical work anymore although I am just 32, and it’s dirty. We have nowhere to take a bath. Even our wives hardly bring the water in the evening to have our legs washed (because of lack of water in their communities). We get to bathe once in a month.” “Last year I found a dead boy, small child, in a banana box. I called the police and they questioned me. I don’t know whether it is more painful to see that child, your soul aches, or to waste your time with the police.”

Prohibitions: The situation with regard to whether scavenging is allowed is nebulous. Since scavenging is openly practiced in the City, most people assume that it is allowed. City officials we interviewed said it will soon be against the law when city garbage services are privatized. We asked Collectors about their perceptions and experience with regard to the legality of collecting. “When we worked for the Public Sanitation at the Vinca dump, they took good care of us, but now they fence in the space and chase us away. That’s our sole problem.” “The police do not let us drive slow vehicles in the streets.” “They wouldn’t let us use horses and donkeys in the city. Most of us believe that scavenging is allowed or, at least, is not prohibited.” “So far it has not been prohibited” or “I don’t know that it is prohibited, it is allowed.” “As long as the dumps exist - that means this work of ours is allowed.” “It is allowed. Nobody from the police has tried to stop us. It is allowed as far as the authorities are concerned. We have no problems with the police. They understand we don’t have anything, so they do not bother us.” “Nobody has kept us from doing it, sometimes they just tell us - both

the people and the police - not to scatter the waste from the cans around when we work.” “It is allowed, it’s only prohibited to scatter the waste around.” “People sometimes obstruct and say, ‘come on, you Gypsies, go away!’ but they are nothing, they are not authorities, they are just like us.” “It’s not prohibited; you got to have a source of food.” “It’s not prohibited as long as you don’t steal.” “Well, sometimes these people from the Public Sanitation chase us away, but it’s not prohibited.”

We discussed with Collectors that the City of Belgrade may in the future prohibit scavenging. They expressed surprise as to why it should be prohibited: “Why should it be? Everyone strives for his own existence. It is allowed.” “Why should it be prohibited when that stuff is thrown away and yet it is useful for someone? I can use it or sell it, then buy whatever I need – medicine or food.”

When we asked them about the consequences of a ban on scavenging, they replied: “Then, that will be another thing they will prohibit us from doing.” “If it is prohibited, it is taking the bread from your mouth.” “Well, what are we to live from if they ban us? Then we would have to go and steal, kill, whatever. We don’t want that.” “How will we support ourselves from if this would be prohibited?” “We hear that they are going to prohibit us to collect solid waste. Shall we go and steal? They should allow us to work, or let the municipal authorities find a job for us.” “What then? Are we to steal? That would be chaos!”

The risks

Scavenging is certainly a business with plenty of risks. *Most Collectors confirm that they have hurt themselves or become ill by scavenging.* The injuries are frequent both among the adults and the children. Men speak more about their injuries and women more about their illnesses.

The injuries are diverse - broken bones or serious bruises from falling bin lids, cuts from glass, burns and syringe punctures. Women said, “Sometimes I cannot work for a long time because I had a heart procedure, so my legs and veins hurt, but I have to, my pension is so small.” “My legs hurt from much walking, the spine too. It’s not easy to push all this weight on the cart.”

The Collectors emphasize that they take care not to get injured. One said, “I have gloves.” They claim that if they are careful about their hygiene, they won’t get sick or infected. One man said, “We leave the rags (collected) outside the home and we wash ourselves.” Others said that they frequently get cuts, but that is ordinary and to be expected. “I am an old woman and don’t work anymore. When I did work, I never injured myself because I took care. I just had colds sometimes and my legs and spine also ached from walking and pushing the cart - they hurt me even now.” “We get ill in the winter from the colds. We never got infected. We despise the dirt and infective diseases, so we work with gloves on and with sticks to protect



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ourselves.” “It’s the newcomers that get hurt - those who are new to collecting and who do not know how it is done. We teach them how the scrap is handled.” “We have not been ill. Sometimes you catch cough. A wind blows here all the time.”

Collectors also complained of bad smells, traffic accidents, dangerous objects, rats, stress from finding dead children in bins and poor clothing for their work. They said the bad smells usually come from dead animals thrown into bins. One man said, “You inhale the smell, and in the summer it is so strong that your lungs ache.” Some claimed that occasionally a scavenger is hit by a vehicle. Dangerous objects also exist in garbage bins, such as discarded land mines and small bombs, and various poisons and chemicals. One man said “During the bombing (of Belgrade in 1999), I felt hot metal. We immediately collected it to sell. That heat was probably what they call now radiation. We’ll see in the future if it will affect us”. Rats are a problem they encounter daily. One woman said, “In my home I have rats, and in the bins you can find them in awful numbers. That’s really terrible.” Collectors reported the stress of finding the occasional dead infant or child in a garbage bin. One woman said, “Dead babies are found in the cans; it’s a big distress when you find that.” A man said, “I found a healthy but blind child of 3 years and two small dead babies in a cradle, together with diapers. What can you do? I called the police and I cleaned up the child.” Finally men and women reported the stress from having to work in the winter with inadequate clothing and shoes. “The winter is cold and we are naked (without coats) and barefoot.” But they remarked that despite all these risks, they must continue working. “What can you do?” they said. “You must continue working!”

Health care

Most Collectors we interviewed have access to the health services. They say they go to the health centers and they specifically indicate where they are located. However, the access to the health services is not without problems. Not all the Collectors have proper papers they need (verified health insurance booklets or refugee file-cards) to be eligible for free services by the physicians. Without them the examination costs 200 to 400 dinars. The reasons for being ‘without the papers’ lie in the lack of the dwelling place registration. “We are not registered at a specific address.” “They ask us for 25 Euros to register us, and we have no such money to pay, so we have no medical booklets.” Health authorities ask for unemployment registration, but they are not registered as unemployed. This problem is resolved through a ‘soft control’ procedure by the health center, accepting them for consultation without the insurance booklet. “They are good doctors, so they treat us.” Sometimes they use other people’s health booklets to gain admittance and care.

Problems occur when they need examinations by specialists that are partially payable (the mandatory fiscal participation) or when, due to the financial crisis prevailing in the health services, one has to bring his/her own medical materials already purchased (X-ray film, for example). That is why “such analyses and imaging are not done because there is no money for



that.” They also lack money for medicines but have to manage somehow to get them. “You can find the medicines in the bins, so I take them when I need them. I know their validity is expired, but who cares, sometimes they help me.”

On the whole, the level of the health care for Collectors is relatively low because most of them rarely visit physicians. The causes are as follows: “You rarely go the physician, only when you really have to, or you can’t work anymore.” “We go when we have some fracture or other serious injury.” “I went because I had a heart attack; they carried me over there.” “We have the (health) booklets for extreme needs only.” “You only go when you have signs you might die.” “When we know we need some medicine, we purchase it without prescription or a physician; it’s less expensive that way. A medicine is only bought for children, if it is a real necessity.” “You go to the physician when you can’t bear it anymore.” “We rarely go to the physician. By the time I get an appointment, so much time has elapsed that I start thinking I am getting well.” “I frequently get the appointment, but I fail to show up because I don’t have the money for transportation.” “The examinations cost 500 to 600 dinars (US\$10). If you don’t have the insurance, you better watch out!” “If I have the money, I go, but mostly I do not go.” “I only go to the gynecologist when I have to.”

Access to health services is not blocked for the Roma. Most of the Collectors have good opinions about the physicians’ attitudes: “They receive us nicely.” The attitude of Collectors toward their own health and their use of services differs significantly among settlements. In the City center and ‘old settlements’ the residents are more likely to use health services than in communities where people are mostly newcomers and less integrated into the system.

The Collectors’ health is not only endangered by the risks at work or the obstacles to the use of health services, but also by their overall poor living conditions. Most have no water supply or sanitation, they are undernourished, crowded into very small houses and have poor heating in the winter.

Desires for a better life

We asked our focus groups if they sometimes hoped for any changes in their lives. The men said: “To have a house.” “To get away from this settlement.” “To stay in the settlement, but provided I can have a house.” “We want electricity.” “To have better hygiene in the settlement.” “To have a sewage system.” “To have a normal apartment for us.” “Minimum of safety.” “A house with electricity and water.” “To buy myself a plot and build a house on it.” “If we only had electricity and water; that would be enough for us.” “I’d like to have a nice house.” “A better life, work, to have some employment and safe salary - you are strong then.” “I don’t need to live like a king, just to have the basic needs for the family every month.” “To have jobs and salaries that one could live from normally; to have regular meals and hygiene.”



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The women said: “Our lives are just miserable; you are neither living nor dying.” “To have a better life so we don’t suffer anymore.” “To have houses for ourselves, to eat, to drink, to live.” “To have jobs for us and salaries that we could live from.” “Not to suffer humiliation like this.” “To have the money for health treatment.” “To go occasionally to the sea to see it.” “To go somewhere for the children’s benefit.” “To have a house for myself, to live in another place, to have a (water) tap, to have appliances, to have a bathroom, to have jobs, to have the children go to school.” “I would like something to change for the children’s sake, I don’t need anything. They need jobs.” “To have adequate housing, as we live in a community with many children, it’s several families together; if we all could only have our own separate dwelling.”

Women, to a larger extent than men, desire better employment: “To be employed in some small firm, and my husband too.” “To be a maid somewhere.” “At least to have one of us employed, and I can wash and cook.” “I wouldn’t support myself from the bins if I could get employment too. It’s only my husband who has a regular job, and that’s not enough for our big family.”

Women also say: “I would change my entire life. To be spruced up and clean - like a lady.” “To have some education.” “If I could just be healthy and live a normal life, I wouldn’t exchange my Gypsy life for the Serbian or European.” “To have my entire life and destiny changed so I don’t have to search the bins anymore.” “I would not have given my child away for adoption if I only had the money to support him.” “To have the municipal service people explain to me whatever I ask them and to receive me as a human being.” “Just to be respected.”

