Deaconess Foundation

A STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE PROJECT THE ROMA GATE EMPLOYMENT LAB

Beyond Words

Language, Dignity, and Inclusion of Migrant Roma in Workplaces

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Foreword

From the perspective of equality, it is essential that every individual has the opportunity to grow to their full potential. This benefits both the individual and society as a whole. This requirement must also extend to working life.

Work is more than a source of income. It is connection to other people, part of everyday life, inclusion, and human dignity. Working life is a place where individuals can use their abilities, grow, and be seen as part of a community. Therefore, how doors to working life open for different people matters not only to the individual but also to Finnish society as a whole.

The Roma Gate Employment Lab project raises an important question: how can we create a working life that truly belongs to everyone? The study conducted by the project offers perspectives on the position of Roma people with immigrant backgrounds in the labour market and reveals phenomena that often remain hidden.

The research shows that language skills, insecure employment relationships, and structural barriers are intertwined in many ways. They form invisible walls that prevent many from participating in working life and the security it offers.

At the same time, the study highlights hope and possibility. It shows that workplaces can also be places of change—communities where people learn together and where diversity is seen as a strength.

The workplace is a miniature of society. When respect and human dignity are realized in workplaces, they spread more broadly: into families, neighbourhoods, and society at large.

Human dignity is the starting point for everything. When people are treated with respect, they can learn, grow, and commit to their work. This strengthens not only individual well-being but also the ability of organizations and society to renew themselves. Every step toward a fairer and more inclusive working life is a step toward a more humane society.

This is especially important when we talk about people and groups who have long been marginalized and pushed to the margins. Roma people with immigrant backgrounds often face discrimination, suspicion, and barriers that are not based on reality but on preconceptions. Dismantling these barriers requires knowledge, understanding, and above all, courage to critically examine our own thinking and actions.

Businesses, communities, and authorities have a central role in this. The future of working life is built on values. If we want a society where everyone can participate and succeed through their own contribution, we must identify the structures that maintain inequality and replace them with practices based on fairness, trust, and respect.

I warmly thank the project's contributors, interviewees, and all those who participated in the implementation of this study. Your work brings to light voices that deserve to be heard. At the same time, it challenges all of us—decision-makers, employers, and citizens—to ask what values we want to strengthen in Finnish working life and what kind of future we want to build together.

The lessons and models of the project are valuable examples for building good working life and inclusion for all. It is important that these lessons spread widely from Jakobstad throughout Finland.

Tarja Filatov
Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Finland

Key Findings

- Labour market challenges for migrant Roma are rooted in systemic inequalities, insecure contracts, and unconscious bias — not language skills alone.
- Exclusion can be subtle: Roma applicants may be overlooked in hiring or denied constructive feedback.
- For migrant Roma, employment is about dignity, belonging, and participation, not just income.
- Workplace cultures that prioritise dignity strengthen motivation, well-being, creativity, and team resilience.
- Workplaces act as miniature versions of society — inclusion at work ripples into families and communities.
- Employers can advance inclusion by using bias-aware recruitment, structured induction programs, accessible communication, and transparent evaluation systems.
- Policymakers should expand integration and language services and provide incentives for inclusive hiring.
- Civil society plays a bridging role: mediation, cultural interpretation, dialogue, and positive storytelling.
- A shift in mindset is needed: from seeing Roma as a "problem to solve" to recognising them as rights-bearing individuals who strengthen the whole community.

Introduction

International migration is reshaping societies worldwide, making them more diverse than ever before. While some countries have a long history of multiculturalism, others are only just beginning to experience its cultural, social, political, and moral implications. Finland is one such country, where tensions often arise between preserving a sense of "authentic Finnishness" ("this is how we have always done things") and responding to the realities of a multicultural society ("with a more diverse population, we cannot continue in the same way").

This tension is further intensified by Finland's ageing population and low birth rate, making the country increasingly dependent on migrant labour to sustain its welfare system and economic growth. Consequently, migration is often perceived as both a threat and a solution.

A 2022 report by the Ostrobothnia Chamber of Commerce found that over 70% of companies in the region are facing workforce shortages, and more than half expect demand to increase. Yet nearly 60% reported that they had not recruited, or even considered recruiting, migrant workers. One reason cited was language difficulties or challenges related to multiculturalism (14%).

Jakobstad, a small town in Ostrobothnia, is relatively multicultural by Finnish standards. About 55% of its residents speak Swedish as their first language, 30% speak Finnish, and the remaining 15% speak other languages. Around 80 languages and nationalities are represented within this latter group, including about 200 Bulgarian and Romanian Roma, one of the most disadvantaged groups in the Finnish and wider European labour markets.

Simply adding more jobs is not enough. Culturally sensitive and inclusive practices are needed to ensure that Roma with a migrant background have genuine employment opportunities.

Research shows that regardless of location, Roma people are more likely to face discrimination during recruitment and at work. They are also more likely to receive lower pay, to be offered precarious contracts, to be denied promotions or training opportunities, and to be given undesirable or unsafe tasks. They are also disproportionately concentrated in unsustainable and exploitative forms of employment, often depending on precarious or seasonal work.

A recent report from the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network, argues that job creation alone cannot guarantee secure, quality employment for Roma communities. Instead, there is an urgent need to foster culturally sensitive and inclusive practices.

In response, the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation established the Roma Gate Employment Lab in Jakobstad in 2024, with the aim of promoting sustainable employment for migrant Roma. This study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the local labour market and to explore how racism manifests itself from the perspectives of both migrant Roma and local companies. The findings provide a basis for concrete measures to improve employment opportunities for the Roma community while helping companies to build more inclusive workplaces.

The study

In summer 2024, the Roma Gate Employment Lab team conducted nine in-depth interviews with migrant Roma individuals and four interviews with local company representatives in Jakobstad.

Migrant Roma participants
The participants, who were selected to reflect diversity in terms of gender, age, length of residence in Finland, and employment history, originated from Bulgaria and Romania. The group comprised four men (aged 28–61) and five women (aged 18–48). Some had lived in Finland for up to 16 years, while others had arrived only a year prior to the study.

At the time of the interviews:

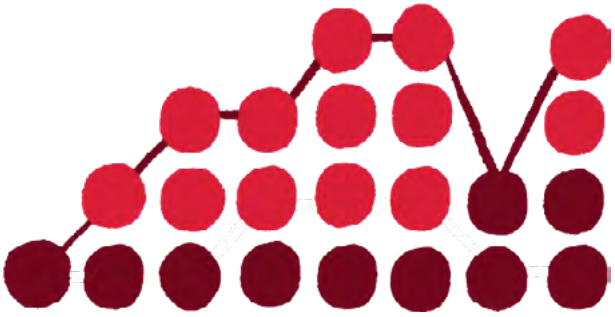
- Two had permanent work contracts.
- Three had "zero-hour contracts," meaning their weekly hours ranged from none to full-time.
- Four were unemployed and actively seeking work.

Family situations varied: two participants were single, five were married with children and/or grandchildren; one was divorced with adult children, and one was in a relationship without children. All had moved to Finland due to family ties. Each had an extended family in Jakobstad, and many also had relatives in other European countries.

Language skills were unevenly distributed: four spoke fluent or good Swedish, one spoke fluent Finnish, and the remaining four had limited knowledge of either the local languages or English.

Interviews were conducted in Swedish or Finnish where possible; otherwise, translation support was provided by Bulgarian and Romanian project workers. Participants were assured of confidentiality, given the option to withdraw at any point, and invited to add or clarify statements afterwards. It is important to note that the project team had known many of the interviewees for years, and this should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Company representatives
Four company representatives were interviewed. They were selected either because their companies employed Roma or other migrants, or because they represented different sized companies. Three of the interviewees were CEOs, and one worked in human resources. Company sizes ranged from three to 300 employees. Two of the interviewees were male and two were female. All interviews were conducted in Swedish.



In the summer of 2024, interviews were conducted in Pietarsaari with Roma with a migrant background and representatives of local companies to gain a better understanding of Roma's employment experiences and workplace practices.

Understanding human existence as relational

Much of our physical, social and cultural environment is designed in a way that pushes certain people, such as the Roma communities, into the margins of society. Preconceived and common perceptions of people in the margins shape how they are perceived and treated. This process, also referred to as that of "othering", creates hierarchies that sustain inequality.

Those considered socially privileged often (consciously or unconsciously) distinguish themselves from marginalised groups, producing narratives that reinforce exclusion. This study is based on a different view of humanity, namely that insecurity and vulnerability are not unique to Roma communities, but inherent in all human life.

The philosopher Judith Butler describes human dignity in terms of "grievability": a life is valuable because (there is a possibility) others would grieve its loss. Human worth, in this view, emerges through interdependence and recognition. This perspective has practical implications. If vulnerability and relationality are central to human existence, then solidarity and support become moral imperatives.

Butler's argument is not a contrast to the philosophical idea of human dignity as something all humans possess but suggests that responsibility for the well-being of others is inherent in the human condition. According to this view, to be human being is to be understood as being in mutually interdependent relationships by definition.

Vulnerability and dependence are not characteristics of Roma communities alone, but part of the human condition. Therefore, inclusion is our shared responsibility.

Although this may sound abstract, it is a philosophical concept with practical implications. If one's understanding of humanity takes for granted that limitations, dependency and relationality are inherent in all human existence, this affects how we relate to each other as human beings. Just as a person in pain needs the care of others, someone with limited cultural knowledge or language skills needs solidarity and the support of others to fully participate in society. Similarly, just as a worker who has been in the same workplace for a long time knows exactly what to do, a new worker will need guidance initially.

This means that integration is not solely the responsibility of migrants themselves; it also depends on the willingness of others to support the process.

This is the fundamental basis for interpersonal being. Hence, there is both a moral obligation to be there for others, and a fundamental understanding that human lives are intertwined. My own success is always dependant on other people, and my own failure to become an integrated part of a new country or workplace is always depends on the willingness of others to contribute to my integration.

Therefore, we argue that if we are to take human dignity and human rights seriously as core values in society, we must make sure that all forms of human existence are governed by these values. If we claim to ensure the protection of all human beings, then we simply cannot uphold practices that compromise and question the worth of certain people. Instead, we need to recognise and embrace all human beings in the way human embodied existence is actually lived, and shape the society accordingly so that people do not have to desperately try to fit into a normative image of human existence.

History cannot be changed, but just as history has shaped the present, so present actions shape the future.

Toward Recognition of Roma Agency

Historically, European countries have constructed the Roma as a racial and social "other," frequently enacting violence against those labelled and profiled as Roma. The Roma endured centuries of enslavement in pre-modern Romania. They were systematically stripped of their language and culture under communist regimes in Bulgaria, Romania, and other countries, and they were targeted for genocidal extermination during the Nazi Holocaust—a history that remained largely unacknowledged until very recently.

In recent decades, many Roma in Central and Eastern Europe have continued to face structural discrimination, often living in segregated settlements and attending segregated schools. Roma children often experience racism, bullying, and exclusion within educational systems. Even those Roma who gain access to mainstream housing and education tend to fare worse across nearly all indicators of well-being, health, and civic participation. Roma EU citizens who migrate frequently face racism, surveillance, restricted mobility, and denial of rights.

Our analysis reflects the everyday, specific, and localised work-related experiences shared by interview participants in relation to broader historical and contemporary forms of dispossession, anti-Roma policies, and systemic exclusion.

Notably, there is a lack of research examining the interactions between public and private employers and Roma migrants within the European Union, particularly in the Nordic countries. Existing studies have focused more on what Danish researcher Camilla Ida Ravnbøl described as patchworks, and what Anca Enache referred to as invisible work: the various informal strategies that Roma employ to ensure economic survival, such as collecting bottles, begging, street music, gathering scrap metal, or selling street magazines. This emphasis reflects the reality that many Roma migrants have had to rely on informal street work due to limited access to formal employment opportunities and integration services.

Furthermore, Jan Grill's research on Slovak Roma migrants in the UK has demonstrated that even those who manage to enter formal employment often adopt invisibility as a strategy to avoid the stigma associated with "Gypsyness" in the labour market. This finding resonates with our own observations: in Finland, Roma migrants are frequently equated with beggars in public discourse—a collective representation that both produces and perpetuates negative stereotypes.

In the context of research and efforts towards social justice, these issues have significant ethical implications. Focusing exclusively on Roma working in public spaces, for example, risks perpetuating racialised and oppressive narratives that depict Roma as positioning themselves outside formal labour markets. For decades, state institutions and some academic research have portrayed Roma as resistant to formal employment and inclined towards informal economic activities. Additionally, Roma are frequently treated as a homogeneous group, obscuring the diversity of their experiences and circumstances, including factors such as gender, social class, age, and language skills.

Our study challenges what Miika Tervonen has termed the "Roma myth"—the portrayal of Roma as inherently nomadic, problematic, or incompatible with modern society. Contrary to narratives that depict Roma as outsiders to the labour market, the women and men we interviewed have long and varied work histories, ranging from employment in socialist-era factories and agriculture in Romania and Bulgaria to working across various sectors in contemporary European economies. Yet, what unites them is a persistent sense of insecurity and precarity.

The study challenges stereotypes of Roma as being outside the labour market and highlights their diverse employment histories as well as the structural barriers they continue to face.

EInsecurity transcends everything

The experience of insecurity shapes the lives of many migrant Roma in Finland, permeating social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon is rooted in historical marginalisation, structural inequality, and limited access to essential resources. While insecurity emerges in specific situations and moments, older experiences of exclusion travel across borders and intertwine with new insecurities encountered in Finland. For instance, the fear of negative labelling due to Roma identity remains prevalent in everyday life in Jakobstad. What begins as an individual concern thus extends into a collective reality that shapes the relationship between the Roma community and Finnish society.

Interviews with company representatives reveal that old stereotypes about the Roma continue to circulate, even when people explicitly state that racism is unacceptable. As one respondent reflected:

> *"I come from a town where Finnish Roma have always been visible, and they are always spoken of in bad terms. But I guess it is true, although surely highly generalised, that the Roma are very loud and they always want to do things their own way. I guess this has its good and bad sides, but at first sight it seems quite scary and different. Somehow, the Roma are always starting from minus and must work their way to get people's trust. Then, of course, perhaps we don't know much about them. But it appears as if they only want to hang out with each other, and that can be off-putting. Having said that, I think it would be important to get more information about the Roma and about the fact that there are Roma people all over the world." (Company Interviewee 2)*

Although such views are often presented as casual observations, they highlight how systemic discrimination continues to shape the experiences of Roma people across borders. In our study, Roma interviewees frequently reported being excluded from the formal labour market due to language barriers, a lack of documentation and limited education, as well as prejudiced recruitment practices. As one participant put it:

> *"In my experience, Finnish people are favoured in recruitment processes. I understand that very well, but it is frustrating. The fact that I don't speak good Swedish is the main reason for not getting the jobs I want, but also my lack of education is a common reason for not even getting an interview. People say that I should learn the language and study, but it simply is not possible. I need to provide for my family. I have lots of experience from construction work, but without a formal education, it is hard. Therefore, I'm destined to work with things I do not enjoy, or with seasonal work that is very unreliable." (Interviewee 3)*

While interviewees often acknowledged the employers' perspective, this exclusion perpetuates economic instability, forcing many into precarious and underpaid work. The resulting lack of financial security creates a domino effect, limiting access to housing, healthcare, and education, and perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

Other studies confirm that the mental well-being of migrants and ethnic minorities in Finland tends to be poorer than that of the majority population. Many struggle with grief from leaving their home country, as well as with traumatic stress disorders, depression, anxiety, and sleep difficulties. Stress associated with minority status, combined with loneliness, is widespread. Our material also illustrates these struggles, as one participant shared:

> *"I was three years old when my dad died and 15 when my mother died. Therefore, I had to stay at home and help out. I never learned to read, and so learning a new language is not possible for me. Therefore, I can never get a proper job and earn my own money. I have never had the sense of success in my life, and I don't even think about that anymore. Success and happiness were never in the stars for me". (Interviewee 8)*

Labour market insecurity not only shapes the economic reality of migrant Roma but also undermines social integration. Employment often provides a pathway into society by offering financial stability and opportunities for language learning, networking, and cultural exchange. Without access to these opportunities, Roma migrants remain socially isolated, which deepens divides and reinforces stereotypes that fuel further exclusion. Limited economic independence also hinders their ability to participate in civic life or advocate for their rights, leaving them politically voiceless and vulnerable.

”In my current job, I feel exploited because the work schedule is so unpredictable and the hours are so irregular.”

The precarious nature of informal or unregulated work leaves many Roma vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Without legal protections, they are often left at the mercy of unscrupulous employers or intermediaries, reinforcing vulnerability and their mistrust of institutions, acquaintances, and even relatives. One interviewee explained:

> *”It is depressing to not find any other job than cleaning. It makes me feel bad and stupid. At my current job, I feel used when the work schedule is so unpredictable and the work hours so irregular. We are also not allowed to go on vacation in the summertime like Finnish people, but we are only allowed to take our vacation when the busy season is over. This feels really unfair.” (Interviewee 5)*

Beyond the practical hardships, insecurity in the labour market has a profound psychological impact. The inability to provide for one’s family or achieve stability fosters feelings of shame, frustration, and hopelessness. These feelings are exacerbated by ethnic stigma, resulting in a pervasive sense of exclusion that permeates everyday life.

The intersection of economic, social, and cultural insecurities reveals a troubling reality: they reinforce one another in such a way that it becomes nearly impossible for migrant Roma to break out of systemic exclusion. Without a stable income, access to healthcare and education remains restricted, limiting opportunities for mobility. At the same time, stigmatisation erodes trust in institutions that could otherwise provide support.

Ultimately, the insecurity experienced by migrant Roma in Finland is not simply the result of individual circumstances, but rather a structural condition rooted in history and systemic inequality. Labour market exclusion lies at the heart of this insecurity, with cascading effects on housing, healthcare, education, and social participation. Addressing this requires a commitment not only to practical measures but also more profoundly to equity and social justice, to ensure that Roma communities can claim their rightful place in Finnish society.

What we talk about when we talk about language

Language and language skills have become central to discussions about migration and integration. While they are often described as the key to successful integration into a new society, they are also considered to be the greatest obstacle. Limited language proficiency can prevent migrants from accessing services, pursuing an education, securing employment and participating fully in social life.

In our interviews with both migrant Roma and local companies, language skills emerged as a recurring theme. Roma participants frequently cited their lack of proficiency in Swedish, Finnish, or English as a barrier to entering the labour market, while company representatives often cited poor language skills as the primary reason for not hiring migrants. On the surface, these statements may appear neutral and factual. However, closer examination of our material reveals other, more complex — and sometimes problematic — dimensions of how language is experienced and discussed.

For many Roma informants, situations that expose their limited language skills evoke feelings of shame and frustration. Whether in a shop, during a job interview, or even in a language class, being unable to communicate effectively is a source of embarrassment. While such experiences might be expected to motivate language learning, for some, they become a further obstacle, discouraging efforts to improve.

Language skills also vary within families and social networks. Some family members are more confident using Swedish, Finnish or English, enabling them to handle everyday interactions with employers, the authorities, schools and neighbours. Those with stronger skills often help others by providing interpretation in various situations, from employment office meetings to workplace instructions. Children and youth, who learn the language through school and day care settings, often support their parents with translation or interpretation tasks. This mutual support is considered part of family responsibility and solidarity, tied to shared locality, kinship, and, for some, faith.

> *"Sometimes I have gotten a job through other Bulgarians, but when they are not present, it is difficult with the communication. It has happened that I have completely misunderstood the task given, which naturally has caused frustration both with me and the employer. Sometimes I have called my son to translate for me when I don't understand, but that is no solution. I often feel ashamed that I don't know the language, since I did go to language training for a year, but I didn't learn much. I am not good at writing, and the class was so focused on writing" (Interviewee 1)*

"I often feel ashamed that I don't speak the language, even though I attended a year-long language course but didn't learn much."

Those who can provide interpretation support often gain a reputation for being "successful," particularly when they also have employment. Within Bulgarian and Romanian Roma communities, this can create subtle hierarchies: between "those who speak" and "those who don't," or between "those who work" and "those who remain unemployed." These divisions can lead to successful migrants being blamed, while reinforcing the shame experienced by those labelled as unsuccessful.

One interviewee with strong language skills and a history of employment emphasised that personal responsibility is the key to success:

> *"For quite a while, you can't think about anything else. To develop in this country, it is key to be able to keep your job. You can't resign at the first hurdle or when things feel too difficult. You need to learn the language if you want to work, and you need to be active yourself." (Interviewee 2)*

Such perspectives often mirror broader societal discourses that place responsibility on the individual. However, within the Bulgarian and Romanian Roma communities, they can lead to additional pressure, blame, and discouragement, which erodes solidarity.

Company representatives also reflected on communication challenges. Some noted that employees sometimes would claim to understand instructions, only to fail to follow them. Employers attributed this to insecurity or embarrassment about asking for clarification. Several supervisors expressed empathy but also frustration when communication broke down. Nevertheless, some interviewees described how they find creative ways to bridge these gaps:

> *"We use quite a lot of body language. I can ask simple things in Swedish in person, but I prefer to ask specifics in text messages, since I can translate the text with an app. Indeed, translation apps are key for communicating with my boss." (Interviewee 5)*

These experiences are further shaped by unequal access to language learning opportunities. Not all migrants can attend courses due to financial constraints, family responsibilities, or the limited availability of classes, particularly for EU citizens. Women working in cleaning, for example, often have few opportunities to practice language skills during the working day. Workplace cultures also vary; in some, coffee breaks and informal interactions create opportunities to learn, while in others, the fast pace of work leaves little room for communication. Supervisors' patience, sense of humour and willingness to explain repeatedly also play a crucial role.

Relations between children and parents differ from those with extended family and friends of Bulgarian and Romanian origin. Often, the children and youth who attended school in Finland master the language better than their parents. Our interviews with parents reveal that they are happy and proud that their children attend day care and school in Finland. They recognise that their children do not have the same language-related challenges as them and will have better opportunities in the future. They recognise the present and future potential of their children, attributing it to being in Jakobstad and in Finland. This motivates them to overcome their own difficulties. One of our interviewees says:

> *"The fact that my children can go to school for free means so, so much. They get to learn the language in both kindergarten and in school, which will open so many possibilities for them in the future. I am happy to know that they will have an easier life than myself." (Interviewee 4)*

Almost everyone interviewed had experienced or wondered whether it is beneficial or not to work in the same workplace as other Bulgarian and Romanian language speakers. They did so since this was the most common way to enter the labour market. Those who could not speak the languages spoken at work thought that other Bulgarian and Romanian language speakers could translate and support their understanding of what needs to be done, as well as helping them to communicate more widely. Those with such experience clearly thought that it is helpful to work in such teams. At the same time, they described situations in which their colleagues who spoke the language were absent, and they had to handle the communication by themselves. Some of those interviewed, especially those with good Swedish language skills or positive experiences of learning and communicating at work, said that if there were more Bulgarian speakers in the same team, language skills development would not succeed.

Workplace support

Learning a language does not depend solely on individual motivation, but also on the workplace atmosphere, team structure and the patience of colleagues.

Everyday realities

Not everyone has equal opportunities to learn the language due to the structure of the workday and the nature of the job.

> *"When several Bulgarians work at the same place, problems will occur. In these cases, it is common that only one masters the language well enough, and the rest remain at the same weak level. You must speak in order to learn". (Interviewee 2)*

Likewise, another person says:

> *"Not working with other Bulgarians would of course be better from the perspective of learning the language better. On the other hand, it is nice when there are more of us. Then we can support each other and help each other out. For me it is simply much more comfortable to work alongside other Bulgarians." (Interviewee 4)*

Although the interviews clearly show that the participants had given thought to how to handle language issues in the workplace, working in teams with Bulgarian and Romanian speakers was still an option. However, there were not many opportunities to choose from in the labour market. While the participants considered the communication resources that their fellow Bulgarians and Romanians could offer, the interviews reveal that successful communication depends significantly on broader workplace-related factors, such as whether there is patience and time to explain things and a positive, humorous atmosphere.

Bulgarian and Romanian Roma in Jakobstad form a relatively small and economically vulnerable community, with limited labour market networks. This reduces their capacity to support each other in finding employment. Tensions also sometimes arise with other migrant groups from Bulgaria and Romania, who may distance themselves from the Roma or even disparage them to employers.

A workplace language environment does not emerge on its own.It is shaped by people, attitudes and everyday practices that determine who can participate and how.

The possibility to learn the language at work does not depend on individual interest and effort, as the "successful" migrants suggest. Women who work in cleaning have few opportunities to hear and use the language at work because of the nature of the job. Also, workplaces have different cultures with regard to how the coffee breaks are spent, and generally how much team members have fun, communicate and interact with each other. Individual circumstances and acts also come into play, such as how patient the supervisors are in explaining things several times. As one participant said, the biggest problem is when the communication stops. Then again, humour and body language, and trying to use different means to communicate were clearly strengths of the workplaces that succeeded in having diverse team members.

Secondly, companies often cite poor language skills as the reason for not hiring migrants. While language skills are sometimes linked to workplace safety or customer interaction, inadequate language skills are also used as a convenient explanation that masks other forms of exclusion, including racism. The phrase "poor language" thus becomes a blanket justification that is rarely questioned. Once established, it can overshadow more nuanced considerations, such as the actual skill levels required for specific roles or how workplaces might adapt to employees with diverse language abilities.

Once the idea of "poor language" is viewed as a single homogeneous issue at the company level, there is less consideration of the of skills needed for specific tasks and roles, or what the workplace needs to change to have employees with diverse language skills. One company that was interviewed described how the team bonded because they used English as a working language, even though it was not the native language of any of them. The choice of main language is influenced by the history, the sector and the employee composition of each company. However, as our interview suggested, it is important to reflect on the effects of having a language as the working language on the relations and interactions among team members.

Poor language skills easily become a stigma, making discrimination appear as an individual's problem, even though the real barriers are linked to structural and attitudinal factors in the environment.

Thirdly, our material clearly shows that poor language skills are always a problem, a barrier, a hindrance, causing discomfort. When language skills are described as "the key to integration" or as "the ticket into the labour market", they not only become a criterion for social acceptance in general, but also an identity marker for migrants. "I don't speak the language, which must mean that I am stupid, lazy or unworthy of x, y, z". When poor language skills are always described as a challenge or as a problem, many migrants internalise in the idea that they are the problem. They, as people, are seen as the problem, the challenge, the barrier and the issue that needs to be overcome.

When considered alongside severe discrimination, segregation, anti-Gypsyism, low social status and poverty, it becomes something much more meaningful than just learning or knowing a new language for individuals and the surrounding society. Through this lens, language becomes both the proof of and the means to integrate both individuals and the entire migrant community from Romania and Bulgaria, who risk being positioned and represented as non-integrated migrants and, in most cases, undesirable migrants. This label is consolidated among companies through comparisons to other migrant communities who live and work in the city. For example, there are recently arrived Ukrainian refugees, and Vietnamese people who have resided in Jakobstad since the 1970s. When a community is labelled and stigmatised, there is a high risk that employers will miss the individual circumstances or the changes, including language development, of those with it.

Our material also highlights how migrants perceive unfairness in recruitment processes, where native Swedish and Finnish speakers are consistently favoured. While some see this as understandable, many feel disadvantaged simply for being foreign, which shapes how they see their prospects. If they perceive the barrier as insurmountable, some redirect their efforts away from integration and more towards family or personal projects that they believe are more achievable.

Finally, language is not only about transmitting information, but also about building relationships. For many Roma interviewees, being treated with respect and kindness was more important than perfect communication. Employers who showed friendliness, humour, and patience were remembered positively, even when language gaps remained. This underscores that, while language matters, attitudes and workplace culture can be equally decisive in shaping a sense of belonging.

To feel seen and heard: Can compassion and efficiency coexist?

Family and family relations play a central role in the lives of migrant Roma. Almost all of those we interviewed said that the decision to move to Finland, and specifically to Jakobstad, was connected to family ties. Many came to reunite with spouses, parents-in-law or siblings. Others followed relatives who had moved there earlier. Family networks provide critical resources for newcomers, including information about Finland, translation support, help finding work and housing during the first months, and help in emergencies. This support is vital given that most families arrive with very limited financial means and few local contacts.

> *"Being close to my family means everything to me. I moved to Finland six months before the rest of my family. I lived with my brother and his family, and once I got a permanent work contract and residency permit, my wife and child joined me. At first, we all lived with my brother's family, but after having saved up some money, we moved into our own home. Through friends, my wife also got a job." (Interviewee 2)*

Having family members or neighbours in a foreign country is a source of feeling safe. Family continues to be a resource for well-being and support, even after moving to Jakobstad. As one interviewee explained, he had almost given up looking for employment, but his family encouraged him to continue. So, family is an important source of integration and well-being for the migrant Roma in Jakobstad. The challenge is that the families have limited resources, knowledge and language skills and few connections to employers and other locals, so there are limitations regarding how much they can support, especially since the way services and the labour market work is very different compared to what most migrant Roma know and have experienced in Bulgaria, Romania and other countries. While it is important to recognise the value of family as a resource, it is also important to acknowledge that not all migrants have such networks. As mentioned previously, the need to rely on others can also be a source for negative feelings, conflicts and unequal relationships.

For many Roma migrants, moving to Finland is primarily about securing their family's future. Everyday life where decisions are made with their children's wellbeing in mind.

Secondly, the well-being of the family, especially of the children, is described by those interviewed as a driving force behind moving from Bulgaria and Romania to Finland, a journey meant to open better living conditions, opportunities and a future. Crafting a good present and future for the family, especially for the children, is a core life value. It is what makes a person good and respectable in the eyes of their siblings and acquaintances. Children, with their presents and futures, also symbolise generational succession, an important life value for individuals and families. The purpose of life is to secure the future of families and children. In everyday life, this means that individuals are expected to act in specific ways towards these goals, or themselves have specific ideas about actions that enable these values. This shapes everyday decisions, such as prioritising immediate income for family well-being over attending long integration courses.

At the same time, EU citizens migrating for work face specific challenges. Although free movement enables Roma from Bulgaria and Romania to settle in Finland, many are unaware of their rights and obligations. It can take years to obtain the necessary documentation or receive an integration plan. In the meantime, families often rely on unstable, short-term jobs that require no language and offer no proper protection, locking them into the cycle of insecurity described earlier. Gender roles further complicate matters: cultural expectations often keep women at home caring for children, which can leave them socially isolated and in a vulnerable position as rights-bearers.

Family life is strongly tied to values, emotions, and well-being. However, our material shows that these also shape — and are shaped by — experiences in working life. When asked what makes a good workplace, Roma respondents emphasised both practical aspects, such as secure contracts and fair salaries, and relational aspects, such as kindness, respectful communication, humour, and a feeling of belonging. For them, being "seen and heard" at work was as important as pay and schedules.

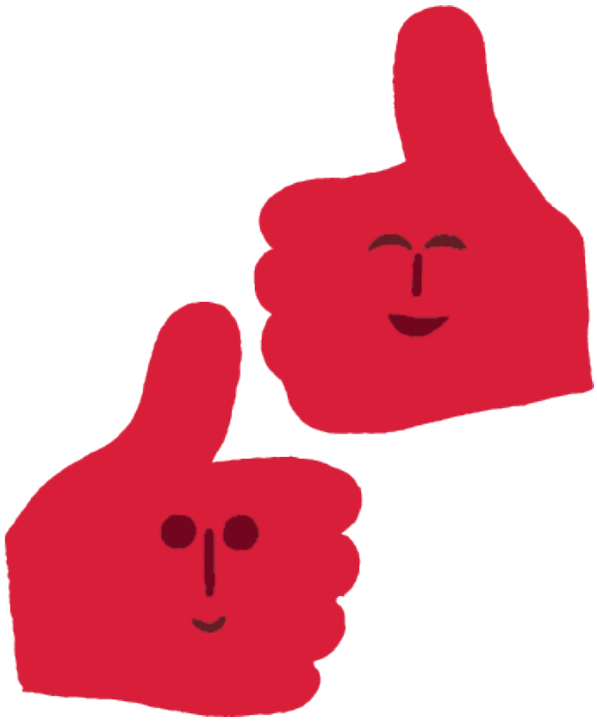
> *"A good supervisor is someone who speaks kindly, cares about how we feel, and shows respect. Even if the language is lacking, gestures and positive attitudes make a big difference." (Interviewee 5)*

The companies we interviewed, which were mostly small businesses, expressed similar values. They stressed the importance of friendly relations, informal gatherings such as Christmas parties and summer barbecues, and spending time together during coffee breaks. Such activities blurred the boundaries between private and professional life, creating closer bonds within work communities. At the same time, employers also emphasised efficiency, precision, profit, and customer service as their guiding values.

Tensions sometimes emerged between compassion and efficiency. For example, some employers recounted situations where time constraints prevented them from being kind or providing explanations. Workers, for their part, often accepted these moments as inevitable, given the demands of the business. In other cases, company insecurities collided with family insecurities: one employer expressed frustration at a mother missing work due to a sick child, despite the father being unemployed. In such situations, family responsibilities and workplace demands were perceived as competing obligations rather than shared challenges. One company representative said:

> *"The supervisors do experience that there are many cultural differences and, in our company, unfortunately, migrant Roma have the worst reputation as employees" (Company interviewee 4)*

Our study shows that for migrant Roma, family life and work are deeply intertwined. Family provides motivation, values, and meaning that extend to the workplace, while workplace practices influence how care and responsibilities are managed at home. The challenge for employees and employers alike lies in finding a balance where compassion and efficiency can coexist — where productivity does not come at the expense of dignity, and where being "seen and heard" is recognised as integral to well-being at work.



Concluding thoughts and practical measures

This study highlights how structural inequalities, cultural prejudices, and practical barriers such as language skills and insecure contracts intersect to influence the labour market experiences of migrant Roma in Jakobstad. While companies often emphasise language as the key obstacle to employment, our findings show that insecurity is not simply a matter of individual shortcomings but is embedded in broader systemic dynamics that perpetuate exclusion. For migrant Roma, employment is about more than just financial stability; it is also about dignity, belonging, and participation in society.

The study also underlines the central role family and caring relationships play in shaping everyday life and workplace expectations. Although Roma migrants' ideals of respect, kindness, and solidarity often conflict with companies' values of efficiency and profit, these perspectives need not be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, workplaces that successfully manage to integrate compassion with efficiency seem to be better placed to establish sustainable and inclusive employment relations.

At the same time, company representatives' reluctance to employ Roma, despite their personal commitment to anti-racist values, reveals the persistence of unconscious bias. This bias rarely manifests as explicit discrimination, but rather appears in subtle, everyday practices. Employers may, for example, assume that Roma applicants are unreliable and not shortlist them for interviews, hesitate to place them in customer-facing roles, or avoid giving them constructive feedback based on misplaced assumptions. Such practices, often invisible to those engaging in them, quietly reproduce exclusion and hinder equal participation in the labour market.

Behind every workplace policy, every language course, and every integration initiative lies a deeper principle: human dignity. It is undeniable that companies exist to profit from the work produced as opposed to being a social enterprise. But work is not only about tasks, efficiency, or output — it is also about people. Workplaces are places where people spend much of their lives, and each person brings their history, culture, language, and hopes with them. When these things are acknowledged and respected, individuals are not just employees but valued human beings.

Treating employees with dignity affirms self-worth as people, builds confidence, and enables them to learn and grow. People who feel respected are better motivated and healthier — both mentally and physically. Dignity-based cultures reduce conflict and misunderstanding, foster loyalty, and encourage creativity. Teams where everyone feels included are stronger, more resilient, and more productive. Dignity is not something we allow only if there is time. It is the very foundation of safety, learning, inclusion and success.

It is important to remember that the workplace is a microcosm of society. When respect and inclusion thrive in recruitment processes and at work, they ripple outward into families, neighbourhoods, and public life. When workplaces protect dignity, they help build a fairer, more cohesive and more democratic society.

Treating people with dignity is not a "soft value" — it is the bedrock of sustainable workplaces and societies. A (potential) colleague is a person with talents, potential and worth. Especially in contexts where marginalised groups, such as migrant Roma, face bias or exclusion, dignity is the principle that bridges differences and fosters genuine belonging.

By linking these empirical insights with a relational understanding of humanity, we can better understand the moral and political responsibilities shared by all members of society. If human lives are fundamentally interdependent, then workplaces, institutions, and communities must be organised in ways that recognise this interdependence. To do otherwise undermines not only the well-being of migrant Roma but also weakens the very fabric of the societies in which we all live.

When employees are seen as people, not just labour,
it creates trust, wellbeing and genuine opportunities.

Ultimately, this study's findings suggest that creating a more inclusive labour market in Jakobstad is both possible and necessary. This requires a shift from viewing migrant Roma as a "problem to be solved" to recognising them as rights-bearing individuals whose participation strengthens the whole community. By addressing insecurity, confronting unconscious bias in everyday workplace practices, and implementing concrete, stakeholder-specific measures, Jakobstad—and Finland more broadly—can take meaningful steps toward shaping not only a fairer labour market, but also more just and liveable futures for all.

To address the challenges presented in this study, several **practical measures are recommended:**

For employers:

- Implement **bias-conscious recruitment** by anonymising applications (bigger companies) and ensuring that Roma candidates are given equal opportunity to be interviewed. Interviews could involve a translator or support person.
- Provide **structured induction programmes**, including mentorship, job-shadowing, and gradual task allocation, allowing employees to gain confidence and skills over time.
- Use clear, accessible communication tools such as translation apps, visual instructions, and plain-language materials to reduce the overemphasis on fluency.
- Create safe spaces where staff can reflect on and challenge their own assumptions through **ongoing bias-awareness workshops** that address real workplace situations like hiring, task allocation, and promotion.
- Establish **transparent evaluation criteria** for performance and advancement to ensure that Roma employees are not excluded from progression opportunities.

For policymakers and local authorities:

- Expand integration and language services to better include EU citizens, offering flexible programmes that can be combined with part-time work.
- Develop incentives for inclusive hiring, such as grants or public recognition for companies that demonstrate sustained efforts in employing marginalised groups.

For civil society and service providers:

- Act as **bridges between employers and migrant Roma**, providing mediation, cultural interpretation, and trust-building support.
- Organise joint **workshops and community dialogues** where employers, employees, and Roma families can exchange experiences and counter stereotypes.
- Highlight **positive employment stories** to challenge dominant narratives of Roma exclusion and showcase the benefits of inclusive practices.

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