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New study paints grim picture of life for Roma in Spain

By Victoria Burnett

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MADRID: The Roma in Spain may have been instrumental in creating flamenco, but members of this community - the oldest minority group in the country - continue to be socially marginalized and suffer discrimination, a study has found.

The survey, commissioned by the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry and carried out in 1,600 Roma households, paints a grim picture of a community of 700,000 people where poverty and illiteracy are high and a sense of injustice pervasive.

The views of the Roma contrast sharply with those of Spain's four million immigrants, who feel comfortable in their adopted society, surveys indicate. Spain has earned plaudits in recent years for managing to absorb Europe's fastest-growing immigrant population with relatively little friction.

"It is worrying," Amparo Valcarce, deputy minister for social affairs, said in a telephone interview. She called the social gap between the Roma and the Spanish population as a whole "abysmal."

"These people have been living with us for 500 years," Valcarce said. "They are Spanish, but they have not been well integrated."

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Spain's population of Roma - the largest in Western Europe - form the biggest minority group in the country. Like the wider Roma population, they have a history of persecution.

Known in Spain as Gitanos, the Roma are believed to have migrated to Europe from the Punjab region, now shared by Pakistan and India, at the beginning of the last millennium. They settled in Spain about 500 years ago, but were persecuted for centuries as Catholic rulers tried to assimilate or expel minorities.

The Roma were traditionally concentrated in the southern region of Andalusia, where they played a key role in the development of flamenco, the soulfully rhythmic music and dance that is Spain's iconic art form. The Punjabi melodies and rhythms brought by the Roma are considered just one of the musical influences that gave rise to flamenco, along with Arabic, Jewish, and Andalusian folk music. But the Roma incubated the art form, which only gained wider recognition in the past 200 years.

The new study of the Roma, made public late last week, was commissioned by the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to guide government programs aimed at helping the community.

Valcarce said a labor bill being debated in Parliament would provide a new mechanism for self-employed people - like the large Roma population of traveling salesmen - to pay and claim social security benefits. The government is drafting another bill that would subsidize and offer tax breaks to companies that employ marginalized or disabled people.

Three quarters of those polled in the survey, which was conducted by the National Statistical Institute, were on temporary work contracts or were self-employed. Seventeen percent received some kind of social benefit - three times the national average.

The survey showed poor levels of literacy and school attendance among the Roma: 15 percent of those polled were illiterate and the same percentage had attended school for five years or less. Just a third had attended school to the minimum legal age of 16 and only a tiny 0.2 percent had received university-level education, compared with a national average of 20 percent.

Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia, head of Unión Romani, a Spanish organization that represents the Roma, said that illiteracy levels in the community were in fact close to 40 percent, but had

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fallen from about 80 percent three decades ago as a result of government programs that have helped the younger generation. In the poll, two in five said their father was illiterate and three in five said their mother was illiterate.

"The situation before was shocking," said Ramirez, who expects illiteracy rates to halve again over the next six or seven years. "You don't see figures like this in Rwanda or Burundi."

Ramirez, a former member of Parliament and the European Parliament, said the real challenge was not improving social indicators, but changing society's "racist" attitudes.

According to the survey, 47 percent of Roma consider racism or discrimination to be their biggest problem. More than half of those surveyed said they had been discriminated against when trying to get a job or rent an apartment. Four out of 10 said they had encountered discrimination when doing everyday things, like going to a bar, swimming pool or disco, or shopping.

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