

Discrimination and Violence against
Women belonging to Communities
Discriminated on Work and Descent
in Accessing Livelihood Rights and Entitlements:

THE CASE OF ROMA WOMEN IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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PREFACE

The status of Roma women in Europe remains a critical yet often marginalised issue within broader discussions of human rights and social justice. As members of one of the most historically oppressed communities, Roma women have been facing multiple layers of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, civil and political and socioeconomic status.



Systemic exclusion has resulted in limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and political representation, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social marginalisation.

Despite legal protections both in North Macedonia and at the European level, including anti-discrimination laws and human rights frameworks, deeply ingrained prejudices continue to hinder the full inclusion of Roma women in society. They are disproportionately affected by issues such as early and forced marriage, gender-based violence, and inadequate access to public services. Structural racism, institutional neglect, and societal biases further exacerbate their vulnerability, limiting their opportunities for personal and collective advancement.

This report, presented by the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, provides a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of Roma women across North Macedonia, shedding light on

the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender in shaping their social realities. It highlights the structural barriers they face while recognising their resilience, agency, and the grassroots movements advocating for their rights. Case studies, statistical insights, and policy evaluations are presented to offer a nuanced understanding of both the challenges and the progress being made.

This report aims to serve as a resource for policymakers, human rights organisations, and civil society actors by amplifying the voices of Roma women and acknowledging their struggles and resilience stories. It calls for urgent and sustained efforts to dismantle systemic discrimination and foster inclusive policies that ensure dignity, justice, and equal opportunities for Roma women across Europe.

Paul Divakar Namala

Convenor

**Global Forum of Communities
Discriminated on Work and Descent**

FOREWORD



The report provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic and human rights challenges confronting Roma communities in North Macedonia, with a particular focus on women and girls.

It examines systemic barriers and issues an urgent call to action for stakeholders at all levels to address the persistent inequalities experienced by these marginalised groups. Framed within the context of the Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), the report highlights entrenched exclusion across critical areas such as education, employment, housing, healthcare, and social services.

The findings emphasise that Roma women and girls face compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of gender and ethnic discrimination, which perpetuates cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Despite advancements like the National Roma Strategy 2022–2030 and the National Action Plan for Roma Women and Girls 2022–2024, gaps in implementation continue to exacerbate their vulnerability to systemic challenges, including antigypsyism, gender-based violence, and limited access to essential services. The report underscores the urgency of targeted interventions to address these challenges and foster long-term empowerment and inclusion.

This document also highlights the resilience of Roma communities and their critical role in advocating for their rights. Outlining the

barriers they face and the successes of policy initiatives offer a roadmap for achieving meaningful change. The findings stress the importance of collaboration among government bodies, civil society organisations, and international partners to ensure Roma women and girls are included in social equity and sustainable development efforts.

The methodologies utilised—integrating primary and secondary data aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—lend credibility and depth to the report's conclusions. It is a vital resource for policymakers, researchers, and advocates, offering insights into systemic barriers and actionable steps to dismantle them.

As you engage with this report, reflect on the stories and data it presents, and consider how we can collectively contribute to building a more inclusive and equitable society. While the challenges are substantial, the opportunities for transformative change are equally significant. Through informed actions and collaborative efforts, we can advance Roma communities' rights, dignity, and opportunities in North Macedonia and beyond.

Daniela Janevska

**Regional Roma Educational
Youth Association of North Macedonia**

INTRODUCTION

More than 270 million people across the world are discriminated against based on work, descent and/or face caste-based discrimination.

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD)[2] are some of the most excluded, segregated, and marginalised groups at the global and local levels within their social, economic, political, and cultural systems. The consequences of this marginalisation include deprivation and systematic exclusion from education, health, and access to water and sanitation, employment, voting rights, equal access to land and housing, and access to religious institutions in the public sphere. These types of social structures have led to systemic violence for centuries against CDWD[3] such as Roma in Europe; the Haratine in the Sahel; Osu in Nigeria, Forgeron in West Africa; Bantu in Sudan; Burakumin in Japan; Dalits (formerly known as 'untouchables') in South Asia; and Quilombo and Palenque in Latin America.

Roma, one of the largest communities discriminated against based on work and descent in Europe, face structural obstacles in accessing their rights. In a Europe that prides itself on its commitment to diversity, equality, and human rights, the persistence of

discrimination against Roma communities, discriminated on work and descent, stands as a stark reminder of the challenges that still lie ahead.

Roma, a historically marginalised and resilient ethnic group, have long faced systemic discrimination and prejudice across Europe.

Despite the strides made in social progress and legal reforms, the Roma population continues to encounter substantial barriers, particularly in areas of work and other key social services and public goods.

This report's purpose is not merely to highlight the problems but also to underscore the potential for change. Through research, data analysis, and candid testimonies, it aims to spark a meaningful conversation on the urgent need for targeted policies, societal awareness, and international collaboration.

This analysis focuses on the barriers Roma women and girls in North Macedonia face, as part of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), in accessing essential services and opportunities. It emphasises how systemic discrimination and antigypsyism affect CDWD, especially women and girls, in different sectors, including education, employment, housing, social protection and gender-based violence. Women from CDWD communities in Europe- the Roma, continue to be marginalised in efforts to advance the gender equality agenda. While State Parties and other stakeholders have taken some steps to implement measures to address these challenges, Roma women still face significant barriers, including social exclusion, limited access to education, access to healthcare, public services, decent infrastructure and housing. As a result, these women are underacknowledged in the mainstream gender equality agenda, but also hindered in their ability to improve their social and economic status.

METHODOLOGY

The approach of this report integrates a combination of secondary data sources and primary data, where relevant and available, to establish a robust evidence base for the study. The report also relies on existing secondary data, published reports by different national institutions and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and news collected and other materials documented by different CSOs and international bodies. Particular emphasis is placed on aligning the methodology with the research objectives, ensuring that potential limitations are acknowledged and addressed. Given the challenges posed by the scarcity of disaggregated data, especially gender-based data on Roma women in North Macedonia, the study adopts strategies to enhance the credibility and reliability of its findings, even within these constraints.

The report has been compiled based on guidance from GFoD research experts. Throughout the data collection process, the GFoD team ensured common issues were addressed and that rights experts understood the expectations of this research process and the concepts used.

The lack of sufficiently detailed and gender-sensitive data necessitated a broader analytical perspective encompassing the wider Roma community. This inclusive approach not only addresses the gaps in data specific to Roma women but also incorporates an examination of information pertaining to Roma children. By doing so, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues affecting these groups while highlighting areas requiring further data collection and policy intervention to better support the Roma population in North Macedonia.

The report aims to lay the foundation for further research. The collected data will also be used for advocacy purposes at the UN and other global organisations, advocating for the promotion and protection of the rights of CDWD in different parts of the world. Professional researchers can also use the data for academic purposes, promoting awareness and knowledge about these communities.

GENERAL STATUS OF ROMA, ESPECIALLY WOMEN AND GIRLS, IN SPECIFIC SDGS

This report examines the obstacles faced by CDWD, particularly Roma women and girls, in accessing critical services and opportunities. It explores challenges affecting CDWD, especially women and girls, across various sectors such as housing, employment, education, healthcare, social protection and services. Women from DWD communities in Europe, including the Roma, remain marginalised in advancing the gender equality agenda.

There are some efforts from the State and relevant stakeholders, together with the CSOs, to address these challenges throughout the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS), National Action Plans on the priority areas of NRIS, and programmes targeting Roma women and girls. However, the direct effect on the Roma community remains limited due to many institutional challenges, limited funding opportunities, insufficient budget allocations, uncoordinated efforts by the institutions, as well as the political context and global economic crisis, which blurs the priority of the state to be consistent on policies related to the Roma community.

In this context, gender inequality, persistent poverty, inadequate infrastructure and living conditions, precarious employment, limited economic opportunities, social disparities, and unequal access to education continue to exist and fluctuate within the Roma community for decades, far away from the SDG goals.

BACKGROUND

The Roma community in North Macedonia, also known as Romani, is a constitutionally recognised ethnic minority, dispersed throughout the country, with a notable concentration in the municipality of Šuto Orizari in Skopje. According to the 2021 census^[4], 46,433 individuals identified as Roma, constituting 2.53% of the national population. However, other estimates suggest the actual number may be higher, or approximately 4% to 12% of the total population. While 46,433 individuals declared Romani ethnicity in the 2021 census, only 31,721 declared Romani as their mother tongue. In terms of religion, the majority of Roma in North Macedonia are Muslims, with a minority practising Christianity.

Educational attainment among the Roma community is significantly lower than the national average, even though the data indicate a positive trend in reducing dropout rates and increasing student performance in the last three years^[5]. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights found that two high schools in North Macedonia had been segregating Roma children^[6]. Roma women face significant barriers in accessing education, leading to lower literacy rates and limited opportunities. Antigypsyism and economic hardships that lead to early marriages contribute to high dropout rates among Roma girls. This educational disadvantage perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Many Roma in North Macedonia face challenges in accessing stable employment, leading to higher unemployment rates within the community. According to the analysis^[7] by the civil society organisation.



the employment rate within the Roma population stands at 23%, nearly half of the national average. The unemployment rate is 67%, with Roma women facing even more significant challenges, as only 8% are employed, indicating a substantial gender gap. Discrimination in the labour market results in high unemployment rates among Roma women. Those employed often occupy low-paying, informal positions without job security or benefits. A 2020 report[8] highlighted that Roma women in North Macedonia are particularly vulnerable to labour exploitation and trafficking.

A significant portion of the Roma community lives below the poverty line, with limited access to stable and well-paying jobs, leading to low-income levels and long-term unemployment.

The majority of the Roma live in substandard housing conditions, often lacking legal ownership of their homes and land[9].

This insecurity contributes to their vulnerability and limits access to utilities and services. Forced evictions and inadequate housing conditions are prevalent issues. In 2020, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) found that North Macedonia violated the rights of six pregnant Roma women by evicting them without notice, highlighting systemic housing discrimination[10].

Efforts are ongoing to address these disparities through national policies and international support aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of the Roma community in North Macedonia. In 2022, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia set ambitious goals to improve the living conditions of Roma in various spheres of social and economic life through the adoption of the third National Roma Strategy 2022-2030[16]. This strategy outlines the policies and measures that state institutions need to implement to reduce inequalities and promote the full integration of the Roma community.

While North Macedonia has adopted anti-discrimination law, its implementation is often lacking. Institutional racism within the criminal justice system further marginalises Roma women, as they face biases from law enforcement and judicial authorities. A 2020 study revealed that Roma defendants, including women, encounter discrimination at every stage of criminal proceedings[17].

Roma individuals have a lower life expectancy compared to the general population[11]. Studies indicate that Roma life expectancy is between 5 and 20 years lower than that of non-Roma individuals[12]. Access to healthcare services is limited for Roma women due to systemic discrimination and socioeconomic factors. They often encounter prejudice from healthcare providers, leading to inadequate medical care. A 2019 regional report emphasised the discrimination Roma women face in healthcare settings, affecting their overall well-being[13].

Roma women and girls face compounded challenges due to both ethnic discrimination and gender inequality. In education, the enrolment and completion rates for Roma girls are lower than those for boys and significantly lower than the national average, limiting their future employment opportunities. With an employment rate of only 8%, Roma women are underrepresented in the labour market, often confined to informal or low-paying jobs[14]. Also, Romani women with limited access to healthcare services, coupled with socio-economic disadvantages, adversely affect the health outcomes of Roma women and girls.

Roma women affected by domestic violence often lack adequate support and protection. Cultural stigmas and distrust in legal institutions deter many from reporting abuse. The same 2019 report[15] noted that Roma women frequently do not receive sufficient institutional support in cases of domestic violence.

ANALYSIS

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The educational legal framework in North Macedonia is built upon constitutional principles, national legislation, and international commitments. It seeks to ensure the right to education, promote inclusivity, and align with European and global standards. However, the EU 2024 Progress Report[18] on North Macedonia emphasises the need for the country to improve access to quality education for all, particularly for children with disabilities and children from Roma communities.

In May 2024, North Macedonia participated in the 4th Universal Periodic Review Cycle. Regarding education, the national report sheds light on a bright picture[19]. However, civil society reports to the UPR[20] that the Roma community in North Macedonia faces the lowest levels of educational inclusion alongside the highest rates of school dropout. These challenges, often linked to poverty and discrimination, contribute to significant learning gaps and poor academic performance. Discrimination against Roma children in education remains a serious issue, with widespread reports of biased treatment.

In 2022, the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination confirmed indirect discrimination within the education system in two primary school cases. These cases involved Roma students being placed in segregated "ethnically homogeneous classes," leading to a de facto separation based on ethnicity. Additionally, a case of direct discrimination was documented in a high school, where a Roma student faced unjust treatment.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the Law on Primary Education[21] incorporates most of the rights established by international documents on children's rights. The law stipulates that every child has the right to primary education and prohibits discrimination based on gender, race, skin colour, nationality, social origin, political affiliation, religion, property status, or social belonging in exercising the rights to primary education and upbringing defined by the law.

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

As in previous years, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy[22] continued to implement the measure of exempting parents from paying preschool education fees. For 2023, 248 Romani children in 21 municipalities were included under this measure of fee exemption. The 2023/2024 school year marks the fifth consecutive year of implementing the measure through a systematic solution adopted by the Government. The figure of 248 Romani children represents 57% of the targeted 430 children covered by the fee exemption measure. During the 2023/2024 school year, the measure was implemented in the following municipalities: Berovo, Bitola, Vinica, Prilep, Čair, Karpoš, Delčevo, Šuto Orizari, Kočani, Kumanovo, Veles, Gazi Baba, Pehčevo, Debar, Centar, Kavadarci, Radoviš, Tetovo, and Gostivar[23].

PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In the 2021/22 school year, 10,155 students were enrolled, while in 2022/23, this number increased to 11,055 students, representing a growth of approximately 9 %. This suggests a positive trend of increased enrolment in primary education. In the 2021/22 school year, 694 students dropped out, accounting for 6.8% of the total enrolled students. By 2022/23, the number of dropouts decreased to 530, or approximately 5 % of the total, indicating significant progress in reducing dropouts, with a decrease of 164 students or approximately 23.6% compared to the previous year[24].

In the 2021/22 school year, 185 students (26.7% of dropouts) were reintegrated into the educational system, while in 2022/23, this number increased to 262 students (49.4% of dropouts). This demonstrates notable success in reintegrating students into the educational process, nearly doubling the reintegration rate between the two school years. In 2021/22, 9,646 students successfully completed the school year, accounting for approximately 95% of enrolled students. In 2022/23, this number increased to 10,787 students, representing approximately 98 % success rate. This improvement in success rates shows that the educational system is becoming more effective in retaining students and enabling them to complete their school year successfully.[25]

Table 1: Overview of Enrolled Students in Primary Education for 2022/23

Academic Year	Total Enrolled Students in Primary Education	Dropouts	Reintegrated Students After Dropping Out	Total Students Successfully Completing the School Year
2021/22	10,155	694	185 (approximately 27%)	9,646 (approximately 95%)
2022/23	11,055	530	262 (approximately 49 %)	10,787 (approximately 98%)

Source: Free Access to Public Information, Ministry of Education and Science (MON)[26]

These data indicate a positive trend in primary education, with an increase in enrolled students, a significant reduction in dropouts, and greater success in reintegrating students who left the educational process. Additionally, student success rates are high, with an increase in the percentage of students successfully completing the school year, pointing to improvements in the quality and inclusivity of the education system.

Table 2: Students in Secondary Education

Academic Year	Enrolled	Dropouts	Successfully Completed the School Year
2021/2022	2,227	243	1,984 (approximately 89%)
2022/2023	1,867	95	1,772 (approximately 95%)

Source: Free Access to Public Information, Ministry of Education and Science (MON)[27]

In the 2021/2022 school year, a total of 2,227 students were enrolled, while in 2022/2023, the number of enrolled students decreased to 1,867, representing a drop of approximately 16 %. This decrease in enrolled students could indicate demographic changes or other factors affecting enrolment. In 2021/2022, 243 students dropped out, accounting for approximately 11 % of enrolled students. By 2022/2023, the number of dropouts significantly decreased to 95 students, or approximately 5 % of enrolled students. This represents a remarkable reduction in dropouts though the years.

In 2021/2022, 1,984 students successfully completed the school year, accounting for approximately 89 % of enrolled students. In 2022/2023, this number was 1,772, representing nearly 95% of enrolled students. This reflects a notable increase in success rates of almost six percentage points, highlighting progress in the overall performance and efficiency of the education system.

Data from the State Statistical Office show that the number of graduates in the 2023/24 academic year was 7,422, of which 17 were Roma (8 men and 9 women).

Table 3: Roma Graduates in Higher Education

	Total – Non-Roma	Boys– Non-Roma	Girls – Non-Roma	Total – Roma	Boys – Roma	Girls– Roma
Total	7,422	2,608	4,814	17	8	9

Source: State Statistical Office

Despite some positive trends, such as an increase in enrolment in primary education, the school dropout rate remains high, especially among Roma girls. The girls and women from the Roma community often face multifaceted discrimination in accessing education. The discrimination of Roma girls and women encounter can come from a variety of stakeholders within the education system, including teachers, professors, peers, clerical staff, and management.

First, Roma girls and women encounter discrimination from teachers and professors, including stereotyping and low expectations, holding biased views, assuming that girls and women from these communities are less capable or less committed to education due to different reasons, and having a discriminatory background. Such discrimination is often accompanied by a lack of support, where teachers fail to provide the necessary encouragement or guidance, discouraging students from pursuing higher education or challenging subjects. They are sometimes directed to special schools without proper assessment, further marginalising them[28].

Second, Roma girls and women are facing discrimination from their peers with bullying and harassment. Their peers may subject girls and women to verbal abuse, mockery, or physical harassment based on their ethnicity, cultural background and religious beliefs[29]. According to the research by the Human Rights Institute, 31.3% of the Roma, i.e. 1/3, said that they were the subject of cyberbullying, which is significantly more than any other ethnic community[30] as a new form of violence, mainly affecting Roma girls. The spread of negative stereotypes about the Roma community is often perpetuated by peers, affecting their self-esteem and motivation.

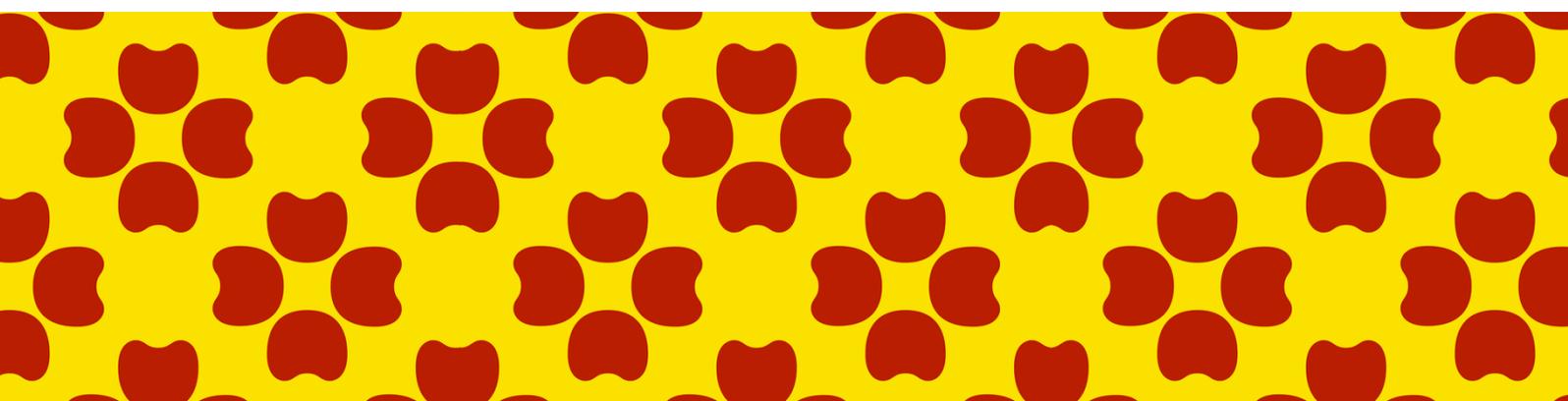
Third, the segregation of Roma children[31], including Roma girls, is often followed by inadequate facilities that lack resources, trained staff, or infrastructure. Available data regarding school segregation related to Roma children can be found in a report from the Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat. It points out that 23% of the Roma children received education in segregated schools, while the percentage for Roma girls is 24%.[32]

Also, the effect of segregation contributes to the existence of prejudices among the teachers, pedagogues, psychologists or, on the other hand, some of the professional services that are in charge of placing the children in special schools[33]. Additionally, the educational materials and instruction do not accommodate the Roma language, causing additional challenges and creating a perception among the teachers that the Roma children cannot follow the educational process.

Fourth, the intersectional discrimination as being a female and belonging to a marginalized community compounds the discrimination, as Roma face barriers both as women and as members of a minority group.

Very often, such discrimination contributes to socioeconomic challenges, meaning poverty exacerbates barriers, as education becomes inaccessible due to fees, transportation costs, or the need for them to contribute to household income.

Fifth, the cultural and family influence, which cannot be directly linked to the educational institutions, societal expectations and gender roles within the Roma community also hinder access to education, as some families prioritize marriage or household responsibilities over schooling.



RIGHT TO EMPLOYMENT

In North Macedonia, the labour force participation rate for women aged 15 and above was approximately 43% in 2023, indicating that over half of the working-age female population remains inactive in the labour market[34]. For employed women, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) notes that the introduction of the minimum wage in Macedonia has led to the regulation of women's status in the labour market. However, the ILO warns that a large number of employed women are not adequately paid and receive only the minimum personal income regardless of their occupation.

Unemployment within the Roma community represents one of the key socio-economic challenges faced by this group in the Republic of North Macedonia. Although the state has implemented various policies and strategies to improve the situation for Roma, data indicate that unemployment within this community remains significantly higher compared to the general population.

Considering that the Labour Force Survey does not take ethnic characteristics into account, the closest indicator for unemployment rates is the registered number of unemployed Roma within the Employment Agency.

Table 4: Active Job Seekers, Roma and Non-Roma (Jan-Dec 2023)

Period	Jan...	Feb...	Ma...	Apr...	Ma...	Jun...	Jul ...	Au...	Se...	Oct...	No...	De...
Roma	11,151	11,083	11,050	11,001	10,944	10,894	10,810	10,639	10,728	10,650	10,653	10,725
Non-Roma	100,746	99,424	97,626	96,588	96,800	96,154	95,139	94,092	94,629	92,488	91,091	94,727
Monthly Change (%) (Rounded)		-0.6%	-0.3%	-0.4%	-0.5%	-0.5%	-0.8%	-1.6%	0.8%	-0.6%	-0.1%	0.7%

Source: Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia

From January to December 2023, the number of unemployed Roma shows a gradual decline, with minor increases observed in September and December. The initial count of Roma in January 2023 was 11,151, which decreased to 10,639 by August—a relative reduction of 4.6% over this eight-month period. This continuous decline may reflect the impact of various socio-economic factors such as migration, internal demographic changes, or potential social policies. After a slight increase in September to 10,728, the number stabilises around 10,725 by the end of the year.

In comparison, the non-Roma population also demonstrates a downward trend. Starting with 100,746 individuals in January 2023, this number decreased to 94,092 by August. The percentage change highlights instability in the number of active job seekers. A small increase to 94,629 was noted in September, followed by further declines before rebounding to 94,727 in December. This suggests that the non-Roma population is subject to significant fluctuations, influenced by seasonal factors, demographic changes, or temporary economic activities.

Table 5 Active Job Seekers, Roma and Non-Roma (Jan–Jun 2024)

Period	Jan 1, 20...	Feb 1, 2024	Mar 1, 2024	Apr 1, 2024	May 1, 2024	Jun 1, 2024
Roma	10,767	10,830	10,796	10,676	10,676	10,533
Non-Roma	105,804	106,618	105,844	103,767	102,253	101,510
Monthly Change (%) (Rounded)	0.4%	0.6%	-0.3%	-1.1%	0.0%	-1.3%

Source: Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia

In the first half of 2024, data shows a relatively stable trend for the Roma active job seekers, with some fluctuations. In January 2024, the number of Roma was 10,767, a slight increase from December 2023. This upward trend continued into February, reaching 10,830, the highest figure for the analysed period. However, from March to June, the Roma population gradually decreased to 10,533.

The non-Roma active job seekers experienced greater fluctuations over the same period. Starting at 105,804 in January, the number increased to 106,618 in February, representing a positive percentage change of +0.6%. However, a downward trend followed, with declines in March (-0.3%), April (-1.1%), and June (-1.3%), ultimately reaching 101,510 in June.

Table 6 Structure of Unemployed Roma by Education Level (Jan-Dec 2023 and Jan-Jun 2024)

Education Level	Jan-Dec 2023	Jan-Jun 2024
Without or Primary Education	92.4%	92.7%
Incomplete Secondary Education	2.9%	2.7%
Completed Secondary Education	4.5%	4.4%
Post-Secondary Education	0%	0%
Higher Education	0.2%	0.2%
Master's Degree	0%	0%
Doctorate	0%	0%

Source: Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia

In both analysed periods, most of the Roma population falls into the category of individuals with no education or only primary education, comprising 92.4% in 2023 and 92.7% in the first half of 2024. This indicates a slight increase of 0.3 percentage points, suggesting that progress towards higher educational attainment remains limited. In addition, there is a need of policies and programs that target unemployed Roma without primary education.

Roma women in North Macedonia face a range of economic challenges stemming from systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and limited access to resources and opportunities. These challenges are compounded by intersectional issues related to gender and ethnicity. According to research covering gender equality and the labour market, several factors influence women's participation in societal dynamics, including societal values, tradition, culture, the socio-economic development of the country, geographical location, and the political system. The International Labour Organisation, in its study, identifies the factors affecting women's participation in society and highlights the inequality between women and men regarding attitudes and prejudices about the different roles of genders in society.

Depending on culture, tradition, and values, women are often seen in roles such as wife, parent, and homemaker, primarily responsible for family care. Additionally, geographical location, political systems, and socio-economic development generate factors that primarily utilise the male workforce, perpetuating the prejudice that women are unsuitable for certain activities.

All the aforementioned factors significantly impact women and act as barriers to their participation in the labour market, overlooking that women should be active participants in setting and implementing development agendas.[35]

According to the World Bank, Roma women in Macedonia[36] show particularly low labour force participation.



Approximately two-thirds of working-age Roma women do not participate in the labour market, indicating that factors such as age, family structure, and education act as barriers to their employment.

All the aforementioned barriers result in unequal access for women in the Republic of Macedonia, regardless of their ethnic background. However, compared to other ethnic communities, Roma women face significantly greater disparities in accessing the labour market. According to the Roma Women and Youth Association "Luludi", the main reasons Roma women are not accessing the labour market are the insufficient information about job vacancies and a lack of qualifications for the job vacancies.

Consequently, these are the main reasons for the high unemployment of Roma women, unlike women from other ethnic communities. Additionally, the lack of information is pointed out due to the conditions and opportunities the Agency for Employment offers[37].

Regardless of marital status, Roma women are 33% less likely to participate in the labour market than Roma men[38]. In theory, the right to participate in the labour market is equal and the same for everyone, including Roma women in North Macedonia. Unfortunately, Roma women, despite being part of the population, are not sufficiently active participants in the labour market of North Macedonia.

Given the status and complexity of the multiple discrimination faced by Roma women (gender, ethnic discrimination, etc.), there is a need for state policies and measures to focus on enhancing the competitiveness and representation of Roma women in social processes and the labour market.

RIGHT TO HOUSING

The housing situation for Roma communities remains one of the most significant socio-economic challenges they face. Poor living conditions, lack of access to infrastructure, legal insecurity, and persistent discrimination continue to undermine the quality of life for many Roma individuals. Additionally, the issue of property legalisation is widespread, with numerous Roma residing in informal homes without valid ownership documentation[39]. This exacerbates their legal insecurity and limits access to housing improvement programs.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, substandard settlements are prevalent in nearly every city. The Shadow Report on implementing the Roma Strategy identifies 15 settlements, with over 5 locations in the City of Skopje, specifically in the municipalities of Gazi Baba, Karposh, Gjorce Petrov, Chair, and Shuto Orizari. These settlements, including Qeramidnica, Brsjacka Buna, Kvantashki Pazar, Zlokukjani, Topaana, and Luka Gerov, have become integral parts of these municipalities over the years, often recognised by the tell-tale sign that they begin "where the asphalt ends." These substandard settlements have gained attention in recent years, often due to public outcry over air pollution and illegal dumping. Instead of addressing these issues comprehensively, city authorities frequently write fines or forcibly demolish these communities.

Efforts to address these issues have been undertaken by various organisations[40], with a notable initiative being the EU's thematic support for Social Mapping of Roma, conducted in 2019. This mapping provided a comprehensive overview of the situation and structure of Roma settlements across 14 municipalities, highlighting the socio-economic status and living conditions of the Roma population. According to the social mapping report[41], about 30% of households in these municipalities are not legalised, making them vulnerable to eviction. The report further revealed that 53% of Roma households suffer from moisture in their dwellings, which severely impacts the health of residents, particularly children, by affecting the respiratory system. Access to electricity is another crucial indicator of housing quality, marking Roma communities lacking electricity.

The report also showed that 18% of households do not have access to a sewage system, 30% lack indoor toilets, 20% do not have toilets with bathrooms, and around 10% do not have drinking water inside their homes.

In many of these settlements, residents mostly make a living by collecting discarded materials, such as paper, plastic or metal. Data from 2023 shows that in terms of their activity, the largest number of the community deals with the collection of plastic and secondary raw materials, followed by trade, public communal hygiene, transport, and construction.

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, as the initiator and signatory of the Poznan Declaration with partners from the Western Balkans for the integration of Roma within the EU enlargement process, has committed to implementing policies in six key areas, including housing. In this context, the Declaration stipulates that countries should "whenever possible, legalise all informal settlements where Roma live; or provide permanent, decent, affordable, and desegregated housing for Roma currently living in informal settlements that cannot be legalised for justifiable reasons."

The Macedonian Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2022-2030 further emphasises this commitment, with one of its specific goals being the urbanisation of Roma settlements within local self-government units. This includes two specific objectives: mapping the current legalisation situation and supporting these settlements' urbanisation process. Besides urbanisation, the strategy specialises in legalisation, communal infrastructure, and reducing exposure to pollution and contamination in Roma communities. Furthermore, in accordance with the Strategy, National Action Plans for the period 2022-2025 have been developed, transferring a significant portion of housing-related activities to the municipalities. These plans aim to ensure that local governments play an active role in improving housing conditions for Roma, reinforcing the national strategy's goals at a community level. This holistic approach underscores the government's dedication to addressing the multifaceted housing needs of Roma communities, thereby promoting their overall integration and well-being.

In 2023, despite efforts at both local and national levels to improve infrastructure in Roma settlements and facilitate the legalisation process, these measures have proven insufficient to bring about meaningful change on the ground. During 2023, the Ministry of Transport and Communications implemented a procedure for the allocation and distribution of 68 apartments in the municipalities of Gevgelija (52) and Demir Kapija (16) under the Housing Project for Socially Vulnerable Groups F/P1674. However, information regarding the allocation of apartments for Category 5 is still unavailable[42].

According to information from the Ministry of Transport and Communications and based on the decision for the allocation of funds for infrastructure projects, eight infrastructure projects were implemented in seven municipalities with a total value of 20,000,000 MKD (approximately 325,000 EUR). Furthermore, data from the Ministry indicate that 17 infrastructure projects were completed in 16 municipalities in 2022. Based on the 2023 census data, it is estimated that 22,314 Roma individuals benefited from these infrastructure projects[43].

Initially adopted in 2011, the Law on Legalisation of Illegally Constructed Buildings provided a legal framework for property owners to legalise their structures, in effect until March 2021. In addition, the proposed Law on Legalisation of Illegally Constructed Buildings addresses critical aspects that remain topics of ongoing discussion. Similarly, the urbanisation process is vital, potentially limiting the number of legalised residences for Roma communities.



From 2019 to 2023, significant strides were made in legalising structures. Out of 2,009 applications submitted under the previous legislation, 879 were approved, representing 43% of the total. This number may underestimate the actual progress, as it only includes projects funded through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Data from the EU reveal that legalised structures include 127 in Vinica, 130 in Prilep, 23 in Berovo, 449 in Shtip, 100 in Shuto Orizari, and 50 in Bitola.

In addition, the table below provides data on legalisation, showing that 2,009 homes fall under the provisions of the old law, while 5,924 homes are awaiting a new legalisation law.

Table 7: Legalisation Status in 27 Municipalities in North Macedonia

Total Requests for Legalisation	Total Homes Not Legalised	Total Not in the Legalisation Process	Total in the Legalisation Process	Total Improved Homes That Cannot Be Legalised
2,987	4,817	1,107	2,009	1,701
26%	42%	9%	17%	15%

Source: Mapping of Roma Settlements – Regional Cooperation Council



The table below provides an overview of non-urbanised settlements where residences remain illegal due to the need for amendments to the General or Detailed Urban Plans.

Source: Mapping of Roma Settlements – Regional Cooperation Council

Municipality	Settlement
1. Keramidnica 2. Brikolazh	1. Keramidnica 2. Brikolazh
Gostivar	3. Dupka
Kavadarci	4. Bushansko Maalo
Kichevo	5. Rashtanski Pat
Kochani	6. Mitko Becharski, 7. Kolarski Grobishta
Kumanovo	8. Osmanov Rid, 9. Bavchi, 10. Sredorek
Negotino	11. Crveni Bregovi, 12. Krivolak
Pehchevo	13. Crnik
Shtip	14. Kavaklija, 15. Ul. 8 Noemvri
Tetovo	16. Ul. 29 Noemvri, 17. Ul. 146
Veles	18. Prtshorek
Shuto Orizari	19. All 5 settlements
Prilep	20. Tri Bagremi, 21. Debarca
Gjorche Petrov	22. Strelishte
Berovo	23. Prohor Pchinski, 24. Goce Delchev
Vinica	25. Romani Maalo

Source: Mapping of Roma Settlements – Regional Cooperation Council

RIGHT TO HEALTHCARE, SANITATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Roma women and girls in North Macedonia face systemic challenges in realising their basic rights to healthcare, sanitation, and a healthy environment. These challenges are deeply rooted in social exclusion, poverty, gender inequality, and the historical marginalisation of Roma communities. Despite some legal frameworks and national strategies aimed at improving the status of Roma, the implementation often falls short, leaving Roma women particularly vulnerable, even though the National Action Plan for Roma Women and Girls 2022 – 2024 was adopted.

The most common challenges faced by Roma women and girls in North Macedonia are the following:

- Access Barriers:
 - Many Roma women live in segregated areas far from healthcare facilities or ineffective healthcare facilities.
 - Many lack health insurance or the financial means to afford healthcare.
- Language barriers and cultural misunderstandings hinder effective communication with healthcare providers.
- Discrimination: Roma women frequently report bias and unequal treatment by medical staff, discouraging them from seeking care.
- Reproductive Health: There is limited access to gynaecologists, family planning, prenatal care, and maternal health services, leading to higher rates of maternal and infant mortality.

The government excluded funding for free folic acid for pregnant women from socially disadvantaged groups, including Roma women, from the 2022 Preventive Programme for Mothers' and Children's Health, and this omission persisted in 2023. However, progress was made in increasing funding for regular gynaecological check-ups, laboratory analyses during pregnancy, and childbirth for women outside the mandatory health insurance system compared to previous years.

Despite these improvements, the coverage of Roma women with health services during pregnancy remains far below the prescribed standards. Nearly 8.3% of pregnancies in the Roma community occurred without any medical check-ups, and 41% of Roma women received fewer than the recommended eight check-ups during pregnancy. Infant mortality stood at 4.5% nationally in 2021, but the Roma population faced a significantly higher rate of 11.8%^[44].

Abortion requested by women for social and economic reasons remains uncovered by the state health insurance system, even for poor and socially vulnerable groups. Medical abortion is only available in a single health facility located in Skopje, the capital city. Although the budget for medical abortion under the 2023 Active Health Care Programme for Mothers and Children in North Macedonia was increased from 500,000 MKD to 1,500,000 MKD compared to 2022, and provisions were made to allow other hospitals to access these funds, administrative barriers and complex procurement procedures resulted in the entire budget being allocated again to the same hospital in Skopje.

While there was an intention to redistribute the funds to smaller hospitals, the tender process was finalised in September, and medical abortion remains accessible only in the capital. This situation disproportionately affects Roma women in rural areas or areas far from the hospital, as the high costs and distance significantly undermine their right to safe abortion services.

North Macedonia has one of the lowest rates of modern contraceptive use in Europe^[45] at 14%, with an even lower rate of 8.6% among Roma women^[46].

Free contraceptives are available exclusively at the University Clinic for Gynaecology and Obstetrics in the capital, making them inaccessible to Roma women in rural areas or areas far from this hospital. This limited access significantly hinders proper family planning within the Roma community.

In 2023, the Ombudsman took proactive measures to address the lack of functionality at the Polyclinic in the municipality of Shuto Orizari^[47], where the majority of the citizens are Roma. The non-operation of the patronage service, the emergency service, and the absence of specialist consultative healthcare and other departments prompted this action. The Ombudsman issued a formal recommendation to the Ministry of Health, the Health Insurance Fund, and the Health Centre – Skopje, emphasising the urgent need to address the residents' demands. Each authority, institution, and organisation within their respective competencies was urged to take concrete steps to ensure timely, efficient, and effective healthcare services for patients relying on the Polyclinic.

With the support of the Institute for Research and Policy Analysis – Romalítico, efforts were made to reopen a gynaecological office in Shuto Orizari. Romalítico facilitated the employment of a Roma nurse for six months, with an agreement that the doctor would take over the responsibility for her employment after this initial period. Additionally, in 2023, field support was provided, resulting in approximately 500 new patients from Shuto Orizari registering with a primary gynaecologist.



While policies and initiatives exist in the healthcare sector, significant gaps remain. Among the positive measures, the role of Roma health mediators stands out. In 2023, 17 Roma health mediators were engaged, seven of whom operated in the City of Skopje, while the others worked in Pehchevo, Shtip, Bitola, Prilep, Kochani, Kavadarci, Vinica, Gostivar, Tetovo, and Berovo.

As an example of indirect benefit for Roma in Shuto Orizari can be also mentioned the renovation of the Vaccine point for preschool and school children in Shuto Orizari polyclinic with medical furniture, with a donation of 1,6 million MKD from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China under the auspices of the fifth president of North Macedonia, Mr. Pendarovski, in 2021. This modest donation equipped as well an RTG Cabinet and renovated the ambulan roof, which sparked efforts to address systemic challenges. It emphasised the need for better medical staffing, equipment, and infrastructure in the municipalities with a higher percentage of Roma population and ongoing investment in healthcare for equal access to quality services. Unfortunately, after a few months, the work of some of the units in the polyclinic was affected by flooding due to the old building's construction, highlighting the infrastructure issues in Shuto Orizari, which takes us back to the root cause of the problems in Roma settlements.

The concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of North Macedonia (June 2024) of the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT/C/MKD/CO/4) expressed concerns about reports of the continued prevalence of child and forced marriage, in particular among the Roma community. The committee also expressed concerns that Roma women continue to be exposed to intersectional forms of discrimination and violence, including barriers with respect to their sexual and reproductive rights and lack of access to adequate health services and treatment. The Committee recommends that North Macedonia strictly enforce legislation on the prohibition of child and forced marriage and address the harmful consequences of such practices. The State party should take measures to combat discrimination and prejudice against Roma women among medical practitioners and adopt further measures, as recommended by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, notably concerning access to adequate sexual and reproductive health services^[49].

The civil society participating in the 4th UPR Cycle, also recommended to adopt a plan for universal health coverage with primary health care, especially for Roma and rural population with proper budget allocation and increase the number of Gynaecologists and Paediatricians on primary health care level with even geographical distribution with proper budget allocation and advised to enhance health education and health promotion, including sexual and reproductive health, healthy pregnancy, child health especially in rural and Roma communities and increase the budget for program for cervical cancer screening and enhance the mechanisms for its implementation and monitoring with participation of the citizens. In addition, it encouraged strengthening the home visiting (patronage) nurse service through an increased number of nurses and adequate equipment, especially for providing services in Roma and rural communities, with proper budget allocation.^[50]

PROTECTION AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The interests of persons belonging to minority groups in North Macedonia are taken into consideration in line with the Ohrid Agreement^[51], with institutions protecting minority rights and international documents safeguarding human rights. However, the practical implementation of legislation and policies on national minorities, especially those belonging to smaller minorities, among which Roma, needs to be improved.

North Macedonia can be perceived as an example of respecting the ethnic identity of the nationalities living in the country in accordance with the framework of promoting democracy, stability, and development of the Macedonian society.

This goes in line with signing the Ohrid Agreement in 2001 which underlines the principle of non-discrimination and equitable representation of all under the law in state institutions and the Badenter's principle in decision-making in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (qualified majority of two-thirds of votes, within which there must be a majority of the votes of Representatives claiming to belong to the communities not in the majority in the population of Macedonia, as well as applicable about decisions on laws which affects culture, education, use of language, symbols, personal ID, laws on local finances and local elections). There is the Law on prevention and protection against discrimination, the Law on the use of languages, and the Equal Opportunity Law.

In the institutional setting, there were advisors on Roma policies in the Government and the President's office, an Interparliamentary group targeting Roma rights, and a coordinating body in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy responsible for the coordination of the implementation of the Strategy for Roma in North Macedonia. 2022-2030, and there is a Roma member in the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.

The equitable representation of Roma in state institutions is not respected (According to the Annual Ombudsman's reports, in two-thirds of the institutions, there are no Roma)! The methodology for adequate and equitable representation, known as "the balancer", limits the possibility of Roma being employed in state institutions.

The "balancer" is a tool used to determine the ethnicity of the person needed to be employed in the public administration by adequate, equitable representation. On September 18 2024, a temporary measure was implemented to suspend the use of the "balancer" tool, and in October, the Constitutional Court ruled it unconstitutional and abolished it. However, no alternative mechanism has been developed to address the remaining problems, particularly those affecting underrepresented communities, which allows the issue to persist.

There are several legal, administrative or other barriers that prevent persons belonging to minorities to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic or public life: Lack of educational institutions to enable producing Roma teachers and professors, literature and textbooks in Roma language; inadequate and unachievable criteria for authors of Romani literature and textbooks on calls by the Ministry of Education which limits the possibilities of producing learning materials for the Course Romani language and culture (there are no books from 6-8 grade for this course, limiting the right to quality education of Romani children in their native language);

there are no cultural institutions for promoting Roma culture, language, theatre and music.



RIGHT TO SAFETY, SECURITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

BIRTH CERTIFICATES

A study by the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) in 2018 found that around 10% of the Roma population, which includes children, could be stateless or at risk of statelessness due to a lack of documentation. In 2018, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy mapped 700 persons without birth certificates. In 2020, the same Ministry adopted a Law on unregistered persons in the civil registry book and introduced a special civil registry for unregistered persons. Between July and December 2021, Romalítico and partners supported 223 undocumented Roma to obtain a “Special Identity Card”. In 2023, there were two cases of death of young undocumented Roma (not having medical insurance to be treated in the hospital). The Law on Civil Registry to be adopted allows every child born in the country to receive a birth certificate within 45 days, regardless of their parents’ status in the country. In total, 526 persons have submitted requests for issuing birth certificates. The total number of requests processed at the end of December 2023 is 447. Of those 447, 217 are female and 230 are male. Of this number, 240 are minors.

Some of the key challenges are the following. State institutions rely on the cooperation of CSOs and international organisations for simplifying the civil registration procedures (identification of people/children without birth certificates or no documentation, and doing advocacy following legislative changes).

There is also the issue of intergenerational transmission of civil registration among Roma, statelessness, no birth certificates, which increases the risk of non-involvement in education and health care, child trafficking, disappearance of children, risks to vulnerable categories and violation of children's safety, etc. and a lack of inter-institutional cooperation for exchanging information (civil registry, ministries, police, social workers, educational and health care institutions, etc.)

The lesson learned and good practices are that the law amendments are crucial, but also the partnership with CSOs and International Organisations such as the UNHCR- ENS Roma Belong project, OSCE, Romalítico, MYLA, etc., are crucial since every actor contributes with expertise, resources and support for the process of registration of persons without documents–birth certificates.

In addition, there is a possibility for issuing birth certificate documents by filling out an online form and making the payment through an online platform^[52]. However, the process is not accessible to everyone, especially the Roma, and it is not well presented to the public. There is also a lack of knowledge and conditions for the use of digital technology among state employees.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

The fact that Roma women in North Macedonia continue to face significant barriers in securing protection from domestic and gender-based violence confirms the research commissioned by the European Roma Rights Centre^[53] and conducted by the Association Initiative for Women's Rights in Shuto Orizari. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, and low education levels exacerbate these challenges, limiting their access to support services.

The societal subordination of Roma women, their residence in patriarchal households, and patriarchal beliefs that normalise violence and discourage reporting further complicate their situation. Additionally, Roma women often distrust institutions and the victim protection system, citing discrimination and systemic barriers as obstacles to exercising their rights. Their economic dependence and cultural expectations of submissiveness contribute to high rates of unreported domestic violence.

A critical issue is the lack of Roma women employed in teams handling domestic violence cases at the Inter-Municipal Centre for Social Affairs. Additionally, regional Centres for Social Affairs lack dedicated teams to address domestic violence, reducing accessibility for victims. The single shelter centre in Skopje, which accommodates only five individual rooms with five beds each, underscores the insufficiency of available resources. The absence of re-socialisation programs for victims after leaving the shelter often forces women to return to abusive situations, increasing the risks of re-violence and femicide.

From the focus group discussions and surveys with Roma women as part of the above-mentioned research, alarming insights were revealed. Many victims are unaware that physical abuse by their partners constitutes violence, and of 200 surveyed women, only 15 reported their abuse. Reasons cited include distrust of institutions, language barriers, and the absence of trusted Roma community members in support roles. Satisfaction with institutional services is low, as many victims find the information unclear or inconsistent across cases. Although claimed to be offered to all victims, Counselling services were reported as inadequate by respondents. Furthermore, not all victims are informed about their rights, the procedural steps, or available social protection services.

Overall, the above-mentioned research concludes that a very small percentage of Roma women report domestic and gender-based violence due to profound distrust in the system. Despite facing significant violence, they often lack adequate institutional protection, even when they choose to report their experiences.

In this context, additional research and studies are essential to ensure that the development of policy documents and strategies effectively addresses the needs of Roma women, incorporating a gender-sensitive perspective. Such efforts are crucial for identifying effective solutions and guiding informed decision-making. To ensure sustainability and impact, these initiatives should be primarily supported through budget funding, allowing for comprehensive analysis, evidence-based recommendations, and long-term policy improvements.



North Macedonia continuously faces a lack of support systems for women who are victims of various forms of violence. The country ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2017 and adopted a National Action Plan (2018–2023). Although the Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was adopted in 2021, according to the Roma women's experience, note that the professionals working in social institutions are not fully familiar with the law's implementation.

Existing institutional support systems for women reporting violence are insufficient, with a particularly adverse impact on Roma women. A recent tragic incident clearly illustrates the critical gaps in protection and the need for more effective and inclusive response mechanisms. Namely, On May 3, 2025, Ramajana Asan, a 36-year-old Romani woman from Šuto Orizari, was tragically killed by her partner in front of her five-year-old daughter in their home^[53a]. Her death has sparked outrage across Europe, with over 60 Romani women and 24 organisations signing a statement condemning the systemic failures that contributed to her murder. They emphasised that this case reflects the widespread neglect of gender-based violence affecting Romani women, noting that in 2024 alone, North Macedonia recorded 142 incidents of domestic violence involving Romani women.

Ramajana had previously reported abuse to the authorities, sometimes in the presence of witnesses, including her father. However, no official criminal complaint was filed, and no protective measures were enacted. According to reports, police officers allegedly downplayed her concerns, suggesting that she would resolve things with her partner rather than taking steps to assess the level of risk or intervene legally.

Standard procedures in domestic violence cases typically require law enforcement to investigate thoroughly, assess potential threats, document physical injuries, and take protective action when warranted. In Ramajana's case, these protocols appear to have been neglected. According to statements from Romani women's advocacy groups, her treatment by the authorities represents a serious departure from how such reports should be handled, including conducting interviews in a secure setting, properly documenting evidence, and acting swiftly when signs of danger are present.

This case of femicide underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure that Romani women receive equal protection under the law and that all cases of gender-based violence are treated with the gravity they deserve.

Often, Roma women victims are required to pay for medical examinations to complete the documentation needed to report their case. Even when they approach police stations, they are frequently discouraged from doing so.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND PROTECTION

Nowadays, great influence is devoted to social inclusion throughout discussions on access to social services. That process implies a series of measures by the states to remove obstacles to the access of all people, under equal conditions, to social goods, to the institutions and infrastructure of the state and the local community. Growing poverty leads to growing social exclusion, which not only affects various groups that suffer social neglect and exclusion in one way or another, but also creates a conviction among these social strata that they are left to fend for themselves. The fact is that what is normatively specified by the laws is not realised in practice.

Systemic discrimination against Roma is persistent, especially in access to public services and goods. A notable incident in recent years was reported, where several Roma individuals were barred from using a public swimming pool. Discrimination is also evident in healthcare and education. For instance, Roma women frequently face discrimination when choosing a primary gynaecologist and are often turned away with the explanation that the doctor's patient quota is full. The fact that Roma people encounter unequal access and treatment is reflected in numerous complaints submitted to equality bodies in 2022^[54], seven of which confirmed ethnic discrimination.

People from vulnerable social categories, particularly Roma women, lack sufficient access to the services offered at social work centres. The main obstacle is the language barrier, which hampers their access to quality services. Roma individuals often highlight the disrespect towards their dignity as users of social services provided by professionals in these institutions, due to their ethnic background and social and educational status. Additionally, Roma people doubt the effectiveness of these institutions because of widespread ethnic discrimination and intolerance by professionals when providing information on accessing social rights for vulnerable communities.

As a result of approximately 20 Roma settlements still not being urbanised and lacking basic infrastructure, about 28% of Roma homes in the country are not legalised. Some of the settlements where Roma people live, including the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, are not included in detailed urban plans, forcing them to live in unauthorised buildings without addresses. Consequently, Roma individuals, including women, cannot obtain personal documents, hindering their access to state health insurance and social services.

According to health prevention policies, all services at the selected primary doctor or gynaecologist are paid for by the patient's health insurance. However, there is substantial evidence that primary gynaecologists charge patients for gynaecological services. This trend of illegal charging of Roma women in primary gynaecological practices has been ongoing for almost a decade. Although the cost of gynaecological services decrease, paying for preventive services remains a challenge for many Roma women, especially considering their social vulnerability.

Abortions requested by women for social and economic reasons are not covered by the state health insurance system, including for poor and socially vulnerable women. According to the Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma 2022-2030, the high costs of abortion force Roma women to seek illegal abortions. Many Roma women opt for abortions due to financial inability to raise another child, but the high costs of these services (as they are not covered by patient health insurance) further strain the family budget.



ANTIGYPSYISM

Despite the endorsement of North Macedonia, on the non-legally binding working definition of antigypsyism/discrimination against Roma adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance[55], the Roma community in North Macedonia continues to face significant discrimination. Negative stereotypes and prejudices against Roma are prevalent, contributing to marginalisation. Roma individuals often report experiencing discrimination in various aspects of daily life, including access to education, employment, and healthcare. This systemic discrimination affects their socio-economic status and overall quality of life.

According to the Balkan Barometer 2023[56], about 40% of respondents in North Macedonia believe that Roma are more likely to be involved in criminal activities, reflecting deep-seated prejudices. Many people express a desire for social distance from Roma. Surveys indicate that over 60% of non-Roma citizens would not want to have Roma as neighbours, highlighting the extent of social exclusion. Roma children often attend segregated schools with poorer resources and facilities. This segregation perpetuates educational inequalities and hampers social integration. The dropout rate for Roma children is significantly higher than the national average. Estimates suggest that only 30-40% of Roma children complete primary education, and even fewer progress to secondary education. Roma faces high levels of unemployment. Data shows that the unemployment rate among Roma can be as high as 70%, compared to the national average of around 20%. Roma communities have higher incidences of chronic illnesses and lower life expectancy due to poor living conditions and limited access to healthcare.

A significant number of Roma individuals report experiencing hate speech. According to a survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), about 30% of Roma in Europe reported being victims of hate-motivated harassment, including hate speech, in the past 12 months[57], while in North Macedonia, there is no relevant data in this regard. Hate speech targeting Roma is prevalent on social media and other online platforms. Reports indicate that Roma individuals are often subjected to racist comments, threats, and derogatory language in online discussions. Verbal abuse and derogatory remarks are common, with Roma individuals frequently subjected to slurs and offensive language in public spaces and online. From the perspective of social media, according to the analysis by Romalítico, it is particularly concerning that some of the statements taken from social media can be characterized as fascist speech because they directly relate to the Holocaust and the historical past of the Roma as victims of the Nazi regime. The portrayal of Roma in the media often includes negative stereotypes and prejudiced language, which perpetuates hate speech and discrimination.



A large proportion of Roma children attend segregated schools or classes, where they are isolated from non-Roma students. This segregation often results in lower-quality education and limited social integration. In terms of segregated schools or classes, an obvious example is the Gjorgji Sugarev primary school in Bitola, where more than 80% of the enrolled students are Roma. However, The European Court of Human Rights issued an important judgment in which it was determined that two elementary schools, "Gjorgji Sugarev" in Bitola and "Goce Delchev" in Shtip, violated the children's right to non-discrimination (Article 14) in connection with their right to education (Article 2 of Protocol No. 1)[58]. This verdict was passed after several years of commitment by the European Roma Rights Center to address the problem of segregation in these two municipalities and advocate for better quality of education to the Roma children living in these settlements. In recent years, it can be noted that there is a reduced number of students in the first grade from other ethnic communities, while the parents of non-Roma children do not respect the rezoning plan and enrol their children in primary schools in other areas.

Regarding the situation with housing segregation and forced evictions, reports from focus groups indicate that certain cardboard settlements in the City of Skopje, which were located near the railway station, were removed.

Meanwhile, in certain municipalities, such as Strumica, the local population has demolition orders for buildings where the community has lived for more than 30 years. In the municipality of Kochani, due to the reaction of the local population, the construction of standard houses for the accommodation of the Roma population, who have lived in an abandoned building in the old barracks for more than 15 years, was not allowed[59].

Officially, August 2 is not recognised as the day of the Holocaust of the Roma during the Second World War in the Republic of North Macedonia. Still, the state participates and supports the commemorative events on this day. The commitment to the recognition of the Roma Holocaust during the Second World War is only on the part of the civil sector in the country.

According to the last report for 2023[60], the Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination, of those who submitted a file and declared their ethnicity 12 were Roma. The most recent data on discrimination complaints filed by Roma women in North Macedonia, as reported by the country's Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, highlight ongoing challenges in multiple areas, notably labour and access to public services. While exact figures for cases specific to Roma women were not detailed in the latest report, the Commission received a record 523 cases in 2024, marking a historic peak in discrimination complaints overall, with a substantial portion related to work, labour relations, and access to goods and services. This aligns with reports indicating that Roma women often face systemic discrimination in education, health, and employment access. In 2021, the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination recorded seven cases of discrimination based on Roma ethnicity.

However, there is a discrepancy between reported cases and occurrences of discrimination cases. Despite the high number of occurrences, incidents of discrimination typically go unreported. Roma often have to accept discrimination against them as part of their daily lives and are reluctant to report cases to the authorities out of fear of retaliation or because they lack faith in the effectiveness of the justice system.

Roma are in need of legal support since they often lack knowledge of the legal definition of discrimination, the available legal remedies and the legal fora they could turn to.

Roma are also discouraged by the inefficient nature of the legal system and the various barriers they face once they choose to report it. Therefore, the number of cases reported to the national equality bodies might represent only a small proportion of the actual discrimination Roma face.

The examples above demonstrate the manifestation of antigypsyism through the lens of public policies and practices that occur in the everyday lives of Roma. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the systemic or structural nature of antigypsyism. Educating society, understanding the concept, and defining mechanisms that will prevent this phenomenon and contribute to an equal society are necessary. Unfortunately, there is a poor scholarship of gender-based data on this topic.



GOOD PRACTICES

There are several initiatives in North Macedonia targeting Roma women. However, even though the Roma women's leadership in North Macedonia presents sufficient efforts to address challenges and advocate for improving policies, much more must be done with the joint forces of all supporters and stakeholders working for this purpose. North Macedonia has aligned its policies with EU frameworks, particularly the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation. The country's National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma (2022–2030) includes targeted measures for Roma women, addressing intersectional challenges related to gender and ethnicity.

In 2021, North Macedonia adopted the National Action Plan for the Protection, Promotion, and Fulfilment of Human Rights of Roma Women and Girls (2022–2024). This Plan aims to advance intersectional justice, ensuring that Roma women and girls have equal access to rights, opportunities, resources, and societal power. With a strong focus on education and protection from violence, the Plan sets out key outcomes and activities to enhance the quality of life and opportunities for Roma girls and women. A primary focus of the Plan is to create the conditions necessary for Roma girls and women to enrol in and complete formal education. Specific activities aim to prevent school dropout through family financial support and the provision of free transportation for Roma girls.

To expand educational access, the Plan calls for increasing scholarship opportunities for Roma girls across all levels, introducing minimum quotas in existing scholarship programs to ensure greater inclusivity. To raise awareness of these opportunities, an information campaign will target parents and girls, including those from Roma communities, on the availability and importance of scholarships. The Plan also addresses early marriage as a barrier to education, with measures for better monitoring and documentation of underage marriages to support continued schooling. To further improve educational outcomes, discriminatory content in textbooks will be identified and removed, ensuring that educational materials are inclusive and respectful of Roma identity, with specific attention to gender perspectives.

In the area of protection from gender-based and domestic violence, the Plan outlines critical support mechanisms for Roma women and girls. These include creating services and support in the Romani language within both existing and newly established shelters for domestic violence victims. Additional resources include providing Romani language support on the national SOS violence reporting line. For those impacted by violence and living in rented housing, financial support for rent and essential bills is outlined to help Roma women and girls secure stable, safe living conditions. Overall, the National Action Plan seeks to address both educational and safety needs, creating a more inclusive environment and providing Roma women and girls with the resources needed to overcome systemic barriers and thrive in society.

Roma women CSOs, who have actively engaged in this field for over three decades, have significantly contributed to the Roma women's movement, addressing all the above-mentioned issues. This report will briefly discuss a joint initiative by mutual stakeholders such as institutions, CSOs and diplomatic missions in the country. Namely, in 2022, a conference titled "The Contribution of Roma Women to Macedonian Democratic Society" was organised at the Cabinet of the President of the Republic of North Macedonia.

This initiative was spearheaded by Roma women's non-governmental organisations and supported by the First Lady of the Republic of North Macedonia, Mrs. Elizabeta Gjorgievska. The conference aimed to articulate topics of interest to Roma women, focusing on their empowerment, health, education, political participation, and contribution to the Macedonian democratic society. It also addressed the Roma women's movement and the challenges Roma women's NGOs faced. The conference facilitated networking among attendees, providing a platform for Roma women's NGOs to showcase their past activities and achievements through promotional materials displayed in the foyer.

Additionally, the event aimed to foster dialogue with potential donors regarding their projects' challenges and financial sustainability needs and to exchange information on funding opportunities to ensure the continuity of their work. The initiators of the conference were the Association of Roma Women Esma from Skopje, the Roma Association "Cherenja" from Shtip, the Roma Women's and Youth Association "Luludi," the MIR Association, the Initiative for the Rights of Roma Women from Shuto Orizari, and the Roma Women's Organisation of Macedonia "Daja.

In 2023, the Council of Europe co-organised with the Government of North Macedonia the 9th International Roma Women's Conference "Building Equality Together" on 30 November December 2023 in Skopje, North Macedonia. This is a significant milestone showcasing North Macedonia's commitment to advancing the rights and empowerment of Roma women. As the host country, North Macedonia has demonstrated leadership in fostering dialogue, collaboration, and action at national and international levels. This initiative strengthens North Macedonia's reputation as a country dedicated to social inclusion and human rights, while contributing to meaningful change for Roma women across Europe.

In 2024, North Macedonia has been very receptive to supporting GfOD's work at the United Nations level. In July the Permanent Mission in New York has joined our side event during the High-Level Political Forum titled "Good Practices and Challenges in the 2030 Agenda: Showcasing Ongoing Inclusive Strategies of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent" which led to the foundation of an informal working group of communities discriminated on work and descent. In addition, the current side event occurred when UN Women Deputy Executive Director Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda had just wrapped up her visit in the country with inspiring and encouraging discussions with women activists from the Western Balkans.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis explores the barriers encountered by CDWD, with a particular focus on Roma women and girls, in accessing essential services and opportunities. It examines the challenges impacting CDWD, especially women and girls, across key sectors such as housing, employment, education, healthcare, and social protection. Women from DWD communities, including Roma women in Europe, continue to face marginalisation in efforts to advance gender equality. The absence of adequately disaggregated and gender-sensitive data has led the research to adopt a broader perspective on the Roma community, including analysing data for Roma children.

The analysis of Roma communities in North Macedonia highlights persistent challenges related to socio-economic inclusion, systemic discrimination, and access to fundamental rights such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare. Despite positive strides in policy development, including the adoption of the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma (2022-2030) and the National Action Plan for Roma Women and Girls (2022-2024), the implementation of these measures remains inconsistent, limiting their impact on the ground. Structural barriers, such as systemic antigypsyism and lack of institutional coordination, continue to hinder progress in improving the quality of life for Roma individuals, particularly women and girls.

In education, while enrolment and retention rates have improved, Roma girls and women continue to face significant obstacles, including systematic discrimination, stereotypes, early marriages, poverty, and cultural norms that limit their participation. Discrimination from educators, peers, and systemic segregation further exacerbates their challenges. These factors not only perpetuate cycles of poverty but also undermine efforts to achieve gender equality and social inclusion within the Roma community.

In the realm of employment, Roma women are disproportionately affected by unemployment and underemployment. Intersectional discrimination—stemming from both their ethnicity and gender—limits their access to formal labour markets, often confining them to informal, low-paying jobs without job security. Socioeconomic disparities and a lack of targeted vocational training and employment programs or programs with high criteria to be applied highlight the need for inclusive labour market policies that address these systemic inequities.

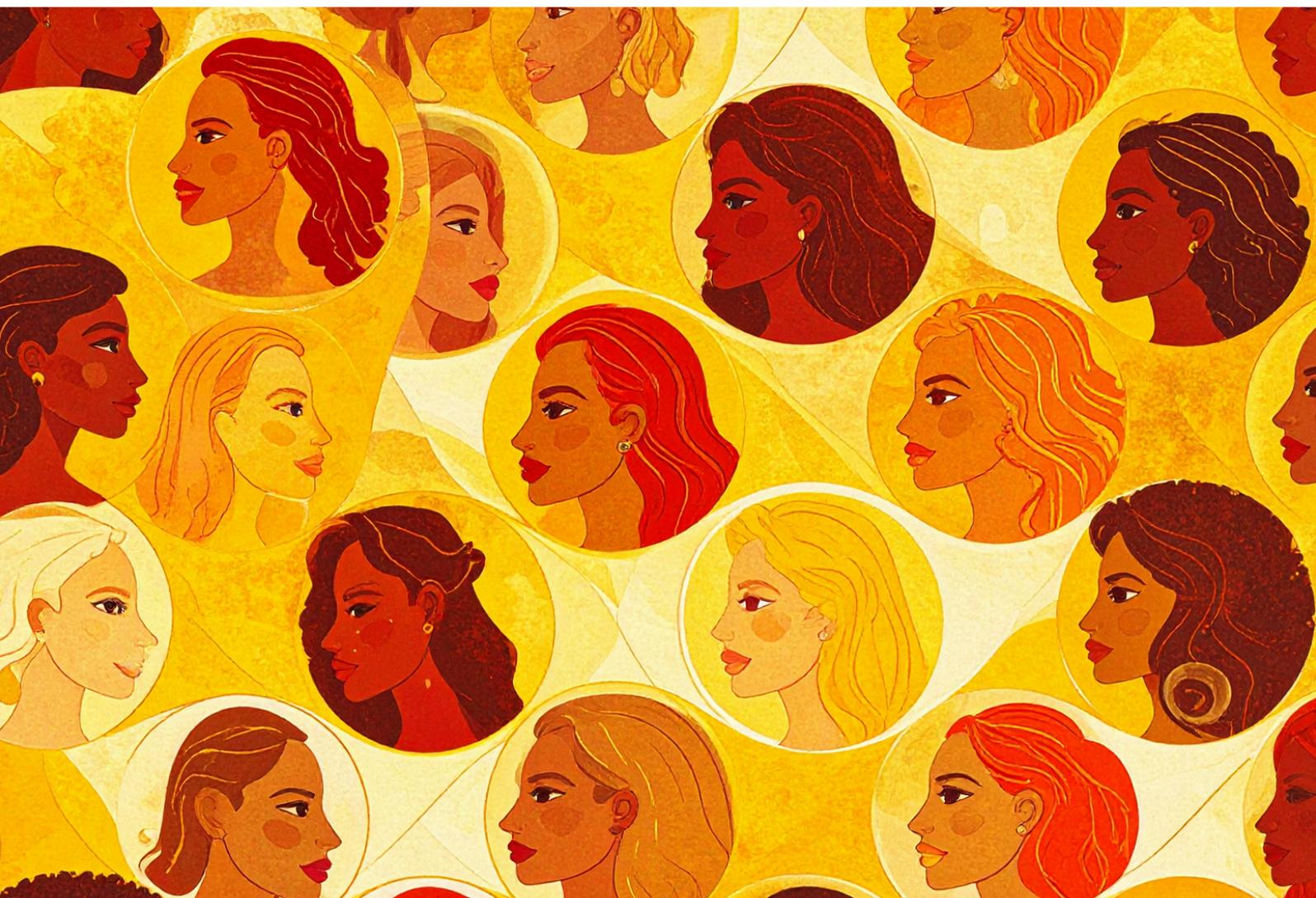
Housing and healthcare remain critical areas requiring attention. Many Roma families live in substandard housing without legal documentation and poor infrastructure, which excludes them from access to utilities and government programs. Roma women face additional challenges in accessing healthcare services due to discrimination, a lack of gynaecological services, economic barriers, and inadequate infrastructure, which also leads to menstrual poverty. These factors, combined with a lack of trust in institutions, contribute to poor health outcomes and heightened vulnerability to violence and exploitation in some cases due to the economic instability of the Roma women in the family.

Addressing these multifaceted issues requires a holistic approach that prioritises intersectional justice, ensures the consistent implementation of existing policies, and fosters collaboration among government institutions, civil society organisations, and international stakeholders. Greater investment in education, employment, and housing, alongside efforts to combat antigypsyism and gender-based discrimination and violence, is essential to empower Roma communities and promote their inclusion into society.

Several initiatives in North Macedonia focus on supporting Roma women. However, despite their

strong leadership and advocacy in tackling challenges and shaping policy improvements, additional efforts are necessary to broaden their influence within the mainstream gender perspective and in the country's policy development plans.

Lasting and meaningful change can only be achieved through the joint commitment of all stakeholders and supporters working toward this goal in advancing the position of Roma women in the country and abroad.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outlined conclusions, the following recommendations focus on the legislative changes and policies needed to support the integration of Roma into society. Considering that only a limited number of activities have been implemented in recent years, it is crucial for relevant ministries, municipalities, and institutions to prioritize the execution of the Strategy for Roma, along with its National and Local Action Plans. Additionally, gender mainstreaming should be considered a comprehensive strategy that spans and integrates into multiple policy areas targeting the whole community as well as within the global gender perspective.

EDUCATION: MEASURES

Creating a Program for Children Aged 7 to 14 – Not included in the education system by the Bureau for Development with a special focus on Roma girls;

Free Completion of Primary and Secondary Education – For individuals older than 16 years with a special focus of Roma girls;

Strengthened Controls in Primary Schools – To determine the actual number of children at the beginning and end of the school year, to establish the real dropout rate, and transition from primary to secondary education.

Systematising Education Mediators According to the Primary Education Law

Scholarship, tutorship and mentorship programs with a special focus to Roma girls.

EMPLOYMENT: LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

Entrepreneurship Law
– Enacting a social entrepreneurship law with a special focus on tax exemptions to stimulate employment of vulnerable categories of citizens with a special focus on Roma women;

Public Sector Employment Law Amendment
– The new model for public administration employment should be transparent and include the civil sector. The baseline for all ethnic minorities should be updated, and Roma representation should be protected in the commission for ensuring equal representation in public and state administration. Additionally, existing Roma employees in the administration should be promoted to leadership positions with policies considering Roma women;

Allocating budget for Business hubs and programs related to economic empowerment and financial management of Roma women, including day-care of kids during the program period.

EMPLOYMENT: MEASURES

Introducing a Measure for Stimulating Long-term Unemployed Persons and Women, Similar to the youth allowance, the Government can introduce a measure to actively include long-term unemployed individuals and Roma women in the labour market. These measures should also include Roma and further motivate unemployed individuals to register with the Employment Service Agency. The youth allowance should not be linked to the level of education, as there are segments of the population that do not have completed secondary education but are working in the production sector.



HOUSING: LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

Law on the Treatment of Illegally Constructed Buildings.

Changes to General Urban Plans and Adoption of Detailed Urban Plans – Considering that one of the main obstacles is that the parcels where Roma families' houses are built are not urbanized and included in the General Urban Plan (GUP) or Detailed Urban Plan (DUP), it is necessary to make changes or adopt new plans for parcels not in risky areas.

Adopting of the Social Housing Law especially targeting Roma women, Gender Based violence victims and Single Parents in social risk.

HOUSING: MEASURES

Technical Support to Municipalities for Urbanisation Project Development – To utilise the central budget's urbanisation program, which is currently utilised at 40-50% in the Ministry of Transport and Communications budget.

Construction of a Social Building in Shuto Orizari according to the planned construction of social housing;

Increasing the Budget for Infrastructure Projects in Roma Settlements – Considering the 100% implementation rate of projects and the community's infrastructure problems, the budget item for Grants to Local Self-Government Units (LSGs) has the potential for an increase.

Monitoring the Implementation of Projects by Municipalities from loans and grants received from the World Bank, Council of Europe Development Bank, and other international donors.

HEALTHCARE: LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

Amendments to the Health Insurance Law –
To include undocumented individuals in the health insurance system.

HEALTHCARE: MEASURES

Systematising
Health Mediators
in Health Centers

Including Roma
Health Issues in the
Existing Public
Health Program –
Developing specific
goals for Roma;

Employing Roma in
Hospitals and
providing
scholarships/
opportunities for
specialisation for
Roma doctors

Accreditation of New Roma
Mediators for Licensing –
To increase the coverage
of Roma populations in
other municipalities.

Equipping and Providing Human
Resources to the Health Center
in Shuto Orizari and in
Municipalities with higher
percentage of Roma;

Screening and early
detection programs related
to Women's health for
Roma women;

Trainings for Health
care providers on
antigypsyism;

Allocation of budget
for menstrual
product for every
Roma girl at school.

Campaigns for rising awareness
about early check-ups and
Women's preventive health
programs with a special focus on
Roma women and women with
social risk.

Investing in mobile
Gynaecological Ambulance in
municipalities with a higher
percentage of Roma
population.



SAFETY AND SECURITY

Employ Roma women in action teams focused on preventing and addressing violence against women and domestic violence.

Establish action teams for violence prevention and protection in regional Centers for Social Work.

Ensure consistent and uniform treatment in cases of violence prevention and protection across institutions.

Develop reintegration programs for victims after their stay in shelter centers.

Encourage Roma women to report violence and seek support from relevant institutions. (Awareness programmes and workshops, campaign in Roma language)

Create specialised programs for working with perpetrators, focusing on behavioural change and accountability.

Employ Roma women in shelter centers to address language barriers and foster a sense of security.

Expand the capacity of existing shelter centers and establish new ones to accommodate victims of domestic and gender-based violence and improve the conditions in the existing one.

Increase and train the number of Roma women to support victims at the SOS hotline.

Establish crisis units within Centers for Social Affairs to offer immediate assistance to victims of domestic and gender-based violence.



SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Enhance Access to Social Protection Programs:

- Expand the coverage of social protection programs to include 75% of vulnerable individuals currently excluded, with a specific focus on the Roma community and Roma women and girls.
- Ensure the timely dissemination of information about available social assistance programs, including eligibility criteria, application processes, and benefits, targeting marginalised groups like the Roma.
- Allocating budget for single-parenting programs with a special focus on Roma women

Improve Educational Allowances and Outreach:

- Maintain and enhance educational allowance programs to reduce school dropout rates and increase attendance among Roma children, with a special focus on Roma girls.
- Conduct targeted outreach programs in municipalities with low participation rates, such as Gazi Baba, to ensure equitable access to educational support.
- Introduce programs for decreasing the menstrual poverty among girls at social risk in schools.

Develop Tailored Programs for Roma Children:

- Design multidimensional interventions to address the higher incidence of poverty among Roma children, focusing on nutrition, education, and healthcare access.
- Collaborate with local and international organisations to provide integrated services aimed at reducing poverty and improving living standards for Roma children.

Strengthen Support for Roma Households:

- Continue and expand reforms introduced in 2019, such as the minimum guaranteed income, social assistance, and educational and energy allowances, to reduce poverty levels in Roma communities.
- Allocate additional resources to regions with high poverty rates among Roma populations, such as Shuto Orizari, Karposh, and Veles.

Promote Awareness of Social Pension Rights:

- Raise awareness among Roma communities about the availability and benefits of social pensions through targeted campaigns and community-based initiatives.
- Simplify the application process for social pensions and assist in high-demand municipalities, such as Gostivar, Kichevo, and Shuto Orizari.

ANTIGYPSYISM: LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

Antigypsyism to be part of the criminal code

Recognition of the concept of antigypsyism in public policies and domestic legislation

- To operationalise the definition of antigypsyism at all levels of public institutions;
- Civil servants, teachers, the judiciary, social workers, and other officials should be educated on antigypsyism to prevent and oppose it effectively.
- To change the legal regulation for recognising antigypsyism as a hate crime.

ANTIGYPSYISM: MEASURES

Improving the institutional and political framework for recognition and taking corrective measures

- To form expert working groups on antigypsyism that provide proposals and recommendations to policymakers;
- To encourage and provide support to national human rights institutions, equality bodies and the ombudsman in collecting data and reporting on cases of antigypsyism;
- To collect disaggregated data on anti-Roma hate speech and hate crimes, including cross-sectoral data, to enable trend analysis.

Support for victims of discrimination and access to justice

- To provide support and assistance when filing complaints about hate crimes, hate speech, offences, discrimination and access to justice;
- To establish and support programs and initiatives to support victims of crimes, speech and discrimination based on "Antigypsyism"
- To monitor cases in the judicial system where Roma complain on ethnic, racial and any other basis.

Preventing institutional discrimination experienced by the Roma

- To provide alternative accommodation in cases of forced eviction of Roma
- To respect the principle of rezoning and establish a system of penalties for parents who enrol their children in school contrary to the principle of rezoning
- To provide legal assistance to victims who reported police brutality

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FOOTNOTES

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