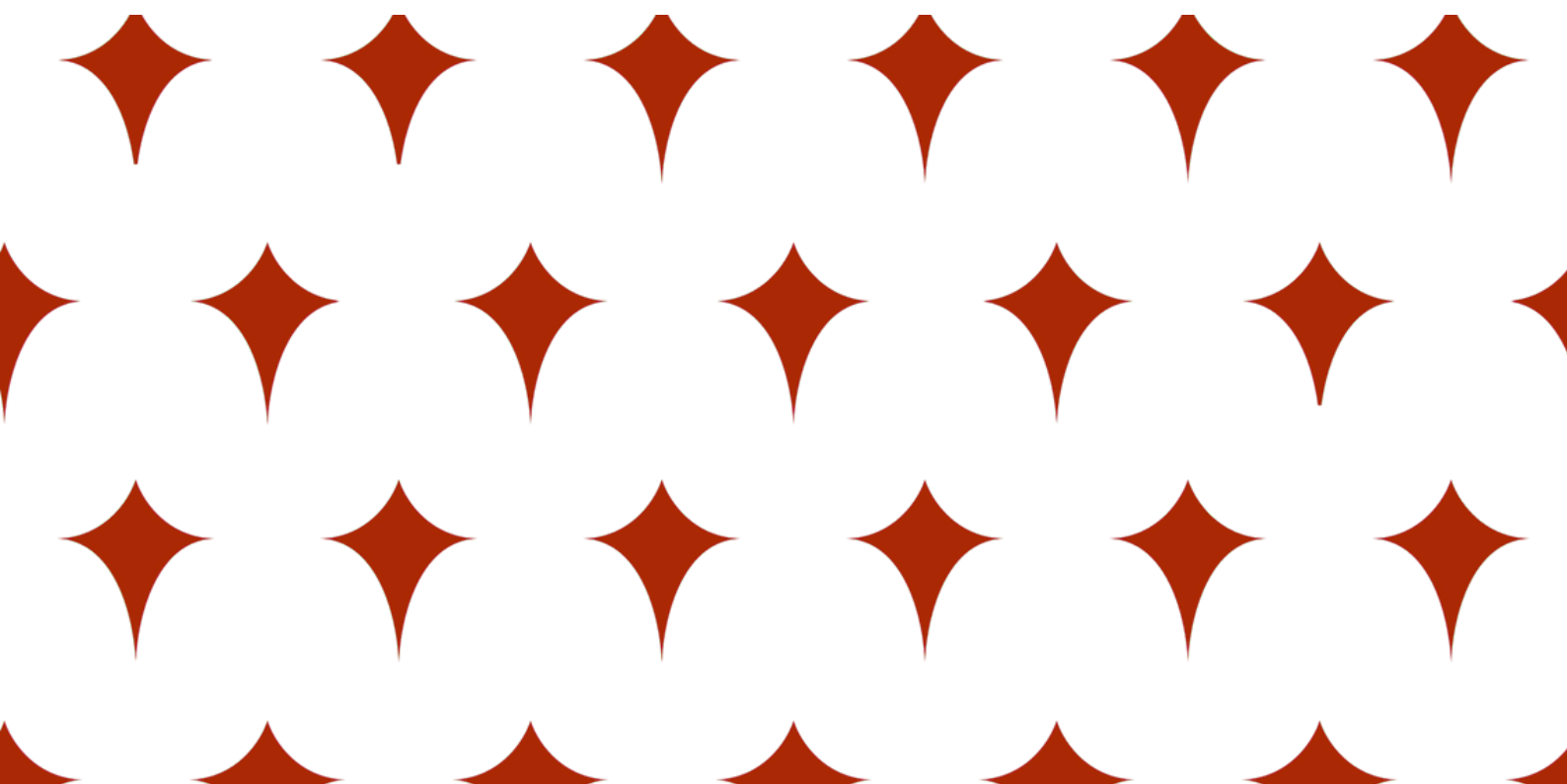


Discrimination and Violence against Women  
belonging to Communities Discriminated on Work  
and Descent in Accessing Livelihood Rights and  
Entitlements:

# THE CASE OF ROMA WOMEN IN HUNGARY



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

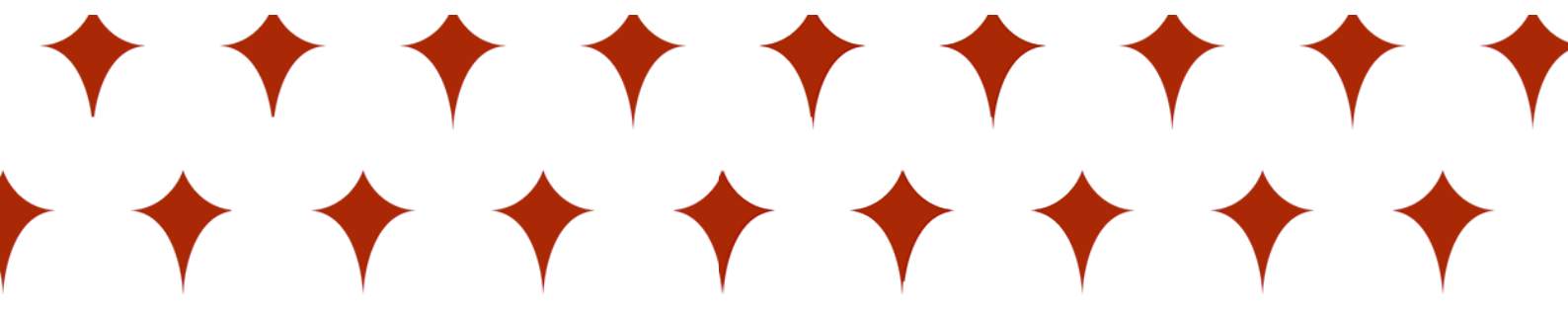
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# PREFACE

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 on the basis of 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 Hungary 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 Hungary, shedding light on the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender in shaping their social realities.

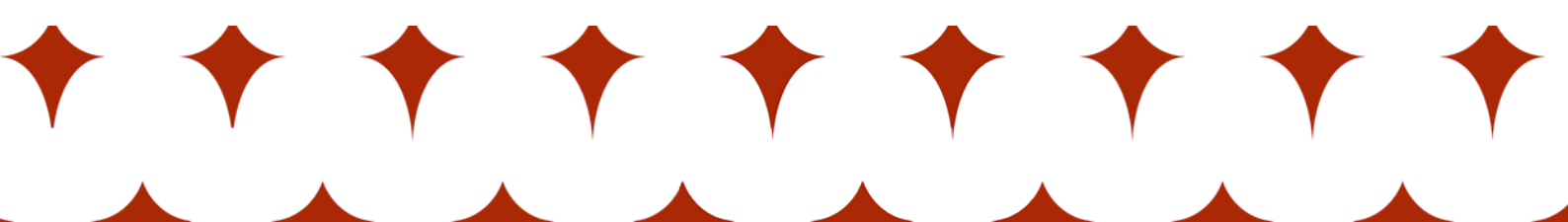
It highlights the structural barriers they face, while also recognising their resilience, agency, and the grassroots movements advocating for their rights. Case studies, statistical insights, and policy evaluations are presented to offer a nuanced understanding of both the challenges and the progress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

By amplifying the voices of Roma women and acknowledging their stories of struggle and resilience, this report aims to serve as a resource for policymakers, human rights organisations, and civil society actors. It calls for urgent and sustained efforts to dismantle systemic discrimination and to 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



There is no single story of Romani women in Hungary. Through their lived experience at the intersection of race, gender, and class, Romani women navigate a society that often refuses to see them beyond its prejudices.

Marina, the researcher behind this report, and I share a long history of collaboration, from university to research studies, including our latest work on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Romani women in Hungary. As a Romani woman born and raised in Hungary, Marina is deeply committed to feminist knowledge production, gender equality, and intersectional justice.

Through this report, she reveals how seemingly neutral policies often mask deeply embedded biases and provides a critical feminist perspective on multiple barriers, disproportionality affecting Romani women. These obstacles interrelate, persist, and are historically maintained due to deep-rooted prejudices, inequalities, and institutional racism: from the lack of healthcare access, unstable employment, and housing discrimination to segregated education, limiting further opportunities.

This report is a call to action, demanding policymakers, civil society, academia, ombudspersons, national and international institutions, human rights defenders, and relevant UN agencies to dismantle barriers, address the root causes of discrimination, take concrete actions, and create a society where policies center Romani women's voices, lived experiences and needs.

At the end of this report, the researcher offers us recommendations regarding gender equality, labour and healthcare policy design, education system reform, and political representation and leadership.

Ending educational and housing segregation, ensuring equal access to healthcare and employment, and securing socioeconomic justice and human rights are urgent, not optional.

Besides documenting inequalities, the report showcases resilience, where we, Romani women, reclaim our narratives, not as objects of pity but as influential leaders of our liberation. Romani women reject token gestures that maintain the status quo. We demand a society where we fully participate in all social, economic, and political spheres, where political systems centre our voices and ensure our representation and leadership in decision-making processes. This report shares valuable examples of resilience and community organising initiatives, highlighting Romani women's strength and agency in fighting for justice.

As you engage with the narratives, critiques, and findings of this report, I invite you to reflect on your role and responsibility in creating a society where Romani women and girls can live with dignity and full human rights. The fight for justice is a collective responsibility that demands proactive actions. Change requires all of us—Roma and non-Roma, women and allies.

**Judit Ignacz**

**Romani Feminist Activist**



# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**CDWD** - Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

**ERRC** - European Roma Rights Centre

**ECRI** - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance

**OSCE** - Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

**UNDP** - United Nations Development Programme

**FRA** - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

**NRSG** - National Roma Self-Government

**CSO** - Central Statistics Office

**CRVS** - Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System

**NGO** - Non-Governmental Organization

**PCOS** - Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

**PMS** - Premenstrual Syndrome

**EU** - European Union

**SDGs** - Sustainable Development Goals

**HHC** - Hungarian Helsinki Committee

**CXXV** - Equal Treatment Act (Act CXXV of 2003)

**CLXXIX** - Act on National Minorities (Act CLXXIX of 2011)

**UN** - United Nation



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In healthcare, Roma women face systemic racism and neglect, compounded by the lingering trauma of coerced sterilisations and limited access to reproductive health services.**

From a Roma feminist perspective, this report sheds light on the systemic, intersectional oppression that Roma women and girls in Hungary endure. Positioned at the meeting point of ethnic, gender, and socio-economic inequalities, they face exclusion from critical sectors such as healthcare, education, employment, housing, and justice. This research amplifies their voices, highlighting the urgency for transformative change that not only addresses discrimination but also empowers Roma women to lead the fight for their own liberation.

The findings paint a picture of pervasive inequities. In healthcare, Roma women face systemic racism and neglect, compounded by the lingering trauma of coerced sterilisations and limited access to reproductive health services. Education systems segregate Roma girls into underfunded schools, restricting their opportunities and perpetuating generational cycles of poverty. The labour market is equally exclusionary, relegating Roma women to precarious, low-wage jobs while denying them economic security. Housing conditions remain dire, with many Roma families trapped in segregated neighbourhoods without basic infrastructure or sanitation, leaving women to shoulder the burdens of deprivation and invisibility.

**who are at the forefront of transformative grassroots movements.**

Initiatives such as the Sheja Consulting, Roma Women's Network and the MARA Program embody the power of collective action, creating spaces for Roma women to challenge systemic oppression and redefine their futures.

These feminist-led movements confront the intersecting forces of racism and patriarchy while advocating for justice, dignity, and equality. This report insists on the urgent need for a reimagined Hungary, where Roma women are not sidelined but are centred in policymaking and social reform. Healthcare must address the compounded discrimination Roma women experience, reproductive justice must be secured, and the education system must dismantle segregation to provide equal opportunities for all.

Economic policies must prioritise Roma women's inclusion in meaningful and secure employment, while housing policies must focus on eradicating segregation and providing access to basic infrastructure. Political systems must embrace Roma women's voices, ensuring their representation and leadership in decision-making spaces.

**The report also celebrates the resilience, resistance, and leadership of Roma women**

# INTRODUCTION

The Roma community in Hungary is one of the country's most significant ethnic minorities, with estimates suggesting their population ranges from 450,000 to 1,000,000 individuals.

This wide range reflects challenges in accurate data collection, as many Roma may choose not to disclose their ethnicity due to concerns about discrimination. Roma communities are dispersed throughout Hungary, with notable concentrations in the northern and northeastern regions, particularly in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties(1). These areas often experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment, issues that disproportionately affect the Roma population. In 2023, a staggering 75% of Hungarian Roma were living below the poverty line, a stark contrast to the national average of 13.8% (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2023). Discrimination against Roma is widespread, affecting various aspects of their lives, including employment, housing, and education, with over 90% reporting such experiences. Only a quarter of Roma feel adequately protected by the law against discrimination, and less than 20% are aware of or have access to free legal aid services.

**Research such as that by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) (2) has found that Roma women and girls face high levels of discrimination in healthcare, employment, and education.**



A report by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) notes the pervasive issue of early school leave and its impact on the rights of Roma girls. In terms of LGBTQ Roma individuals, the same ERRC research highlights the double marginalisation they face both from the majority society and their own communities.



Research by Amnesty International(3) and other organisations has found that political representation of Roma women and LGBTQ individuals is severely lacking in Hungary. Their voices are often excluded from policy-making, leaving their specific concerns unaddressed. In Hungary, there are de facto barriers excluding Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals from effective participation in decision-making processes. Roma individuals face systemic discrimination and are underrepresented in political spaces. Roma women and LGBTQ people experience additional exclusion due to their intersectional identities.

A 2021 report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (4) notes that Hungary's political climate has created an environment where Roma voices, particularly those of Roma women and LGBTQ individuals, are marginalised. This exclusion perpetuates existing disparities and limits the community's ability to advocate for their needs.

Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals face multiple barriers in cultural, religious, social, economic, and public life. Discriminatory practices in healthcare and education, for example, limit Roma women's and girls' access to essential services. Roma women often face gender-based violence, and LGBTQ Roma individuals encounter additional challenges due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Roma LGBTQ individuals often face discrimination and prejudice within their own communities, leading to isolation and limited access to support.**

Hungary recognises the Roma as a national minority, granting them specific rights under the country's legal framework. The 1993 Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities provides for cultural autonomy and the establishment of minority self-governments(5). The National Roma Self-Government (Országos Roma Önkormányzat) serves as a representative body, advocating for Roma interests and managing cultural initiatives.

Roma women in Hungary suffer from deeply rooted marginalisation, resulting from intersecting ethnic and gender-based discrimination. This marginalisation creates significant structural barriers across essential areas, including healthcare, education, employment, housing, and basic services such as water and sanitation. Such widespread exclusion contradicts Hungary's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasising equal access to fundamental resources and services for all. Yet, despite these commitments, Roma women remain systematically excluded, their access limited by socioeconomic disadvantages and discriminatory practices that affect every aspect of their daily lives (World Bank, 2023; UN Women, 2024).

In addressing the marginalisation of Roma women, a human rights-based perspective is therefore critical. This approach necessitates examining not only these multiple layers of disadvantage but also the responsibilities of the Hungarian government in dismantling barriers and confronting the entrenched societal biases that perpetuate these inequalities. Only through proactive reform and sincere inclusion can Hungary honour its legal and moral obligations to foster an inclusive society that respects the rights and dignity of all its citizens, including Roma women.



# 1. SECTOR-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS

## 1.1. HEALTHCARE

Healthcare access is a basic human right, yet Roma women in Hungary face numerous obstacles that hinder even minimal access to medical services. Predominantly residing in isolated and impoverished areas, Roma communities encounter significant barriers to healthcare due to both geographic inaccessibility and financial difficulties.

Additionally, racial discrimination within healthcare settings compounds these challenges; many Roma women report mistreatment and dismissive attitudes from healthcare professionals, which deters them from seeking necessary care. The legacy of coerced sterilisations in the 2000s has further eroded trust, leaving many Roma women with unresolved health issues, including chronic illnesses and maternal health complications. Such exclusion from healthcare services not only contravenes Hungary's commitments to health rights but also violates Roma women's dignity and well-being(6).

Health disparities between Roma and non-Roma communities in Hungary are high. A 2019 report from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (7) found that Roma women in Hungary are more constrained in their daily activities by health issues compared to non-Roma women (29.3% vs. 23%).

**Moreover, Roma women face a life expectancy that is roughly ten years shorter than their non-Roma counterparts.**

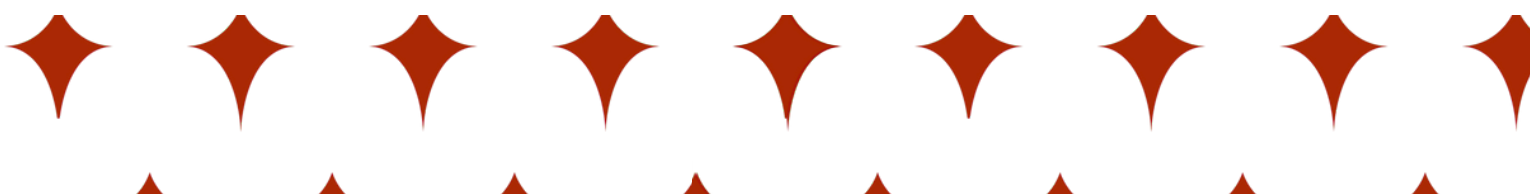
The primary health challenges affecting Roma women and girls stem from high smoking rates, limited access to quality healthcare, lack of nutritional knowledge, and high-stress levels.

Previous research has shown that Roma women are less likely to have access to appropriate gynaecological care and less likely to take account of their own health problems.

This may be due to poverty, lack of awareness of social disadvantages in the Roma community, and systemic discrimination that makes it impossible for them to be properly informed about their health and to access the health services they need(8).

Research also shows that Roma women often lack access to adequate gynaecological care and are less likely to address personal health issues. This may be due to a combination of poverty, low health awareness within the Roma community, and systemic discrimination, which makes it difficult for them to receive accurate health information or to access necessary services. For example, cervical cancer is more prevalent among Roma women in Hungary, with social factors like economic hardship, racism, and restrictive gender norms playing a role in exacerbating these risks(9).

Despite the significant influence of economic factors on the reproductive health of Roma women and girls, menstrual poverty remains under-researched.



Menstrual health, tied closely to economic conditions, should be central in discussions on Roma women's and girls' health. Menstrual health encompasses access to products and hygiene and is interwoven with the right to water and sanitation –fundamental human rights. Menstrual health is also affected by the resources and infrastructure in a woman's life, her access to information, the availability of health services, and any discrimination she may face.

The importance of menstrual health was echoed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who highlighted at the 50th session of the Human Rights Council that menstrual experiences vary widely, shaped by factors such as age, gender, race, disability, economic status, social context, and crises like conflict or health emergencies.

**"By speaking their truth and making their voices heard, these activists (feminist activists) are making a significant contribution to clarifying that the menstrual experiences of women and girls are not homogenous, but are shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, race, disability, economic, social, migration and other situations and contexts, whether peace, conflict, disaster or health crisis(10)."**

An amateur documentary film titled *Pressure Reduction*(11), made by three young Roma women during the Romédia Foundation's Buvero Roma Women's Media Camp, vividly illustrates the struggles of Roma women in Hungary. The film follows an elderly Roma woman who fetches water from a well daily for her family's cooking, cleaning, and washing needs, underscoring the challenging conditions many Roma families face.

Due to financial hardship, many households on the street have had their water supply cut off. While men often seek work in distant towns, women and girls bear the burden of child and self-care with insufficient resources. Although the film doesn't specifically discuss menstrual health, it's easy to imagine the added strain on these women and girls in managing menstruation without easy access to water. The installation of pressure reducers on wells used by multiple families only compounds the difficulty of obtaining enough water, indicating a systemic issue impacting Roma communities across Europe.

A survey by Hungary's Little Bubs Baby-Mama Association(12) delved into the issue of menstrual poverty, gathering responses from 240 women. Their findings revealed that 30% of respondents experienced menstrual poverty, with 57 resorting to using paper towels, 36 using rags, and 20 using cotton wool as substitutes for pads or tampons. This lack of access, coupled with a pervasive sense of shame, affects daily activities, including work and school attendance.



An article on the abcúg media platform<sup>(13)</sup> corroborates these findings, illustrating the lengths to which homeless women go to manage menstruation, often resorting to “creative” solutions. Judit, a homeless woman, shared that she would sometimes ask for money under the pretence of needing cigarettes, knowing people wouldn’t offer money for tampons. Without other options, she would collect toilet paper from public restrooms to get by, though this often led to embarrassing situations when she leaked. With more shopping centres charging for bathroom access, this last resort is becoming even more inaccessible.

Menstrual poverty isn’t just limited to homeless women—girls from disadvantaged backgrounds face similar struggles. A teacher in Budapest noted that many of her students lack basic knowledge about menstruation and cannot afford products like pads and tampons. This lack of hygiene products and information perpetuates a cycle of shame and misinformation, impacting girls’ health and educational outcomes. Without proper hygiene, they’re at risk of infections that require medical treatment, which many can’t afford. Over time, untreated infections may lead to serious health issues, such as infertility or even cancer. For disadvantaged girls, the stigma surrounding menstruation and lack of support can result in poor school attendance or dropping out altogether.

Addressing menstrual poverty requires comprehensive solutions. While donating menstrual products can offer short-term relief, sustainable change demands more: social services to help women secure housing and jobs, school programs to educate students about reproductive health, and community initiatives to destigmatise menstruation. Only through a holistic approach can we start to tackle the deeply ingrained issue of menstrual poverty and ensure that all women and girls, regardless of their background, have the resources and support they need.

Marina Csikos’s recent research<sup>(14)</sup>, in which she interviewed Roma women with gynaecological conditions (endometriosis, PCOS and PMS), gave deep insights into the intersectional experiences they encountered in the course of their illnesses. Discussing the issues separately, yet interpreting them together, demonstrated how intersectional discrimination affects the lives of Roma women and their experience of their illnesses. Systemic and interpersonal racism against Roma, socially embedded sexism, taboos and (information) poverty around menstruation, ideals of feminine beauty, deteriorating home health situation and infrastructure, geographical isolation, age-related vulnerability, etc., can characterise and negatively affect the lives of Roma women with PCOS, endometriosis and PMS. Of course, like any other group, Roma women cannot be treated as a homogenous group, as each person has their privileges, which vary from individual to individual and from group to group. However, a systemic examination and understanding of intersectional discrimination is essential to identify the vulnerabilities of certain groups and to find solutions to problems together as a society. As Roma women do not have the political representation of the majority society, similar research must highlight issues where patterns of racism, sexism, and elitism expose individuals to intersectional discrimination.

It is also important to note that, for example, lack of information around menstruation, deteriorating domestic health infrastructure, sexist behaviour of gynaecologists, etc., affect not only Roma women but also the majority of society. However, since Roma women are more affected by poverty, social isolation, health discrimination, etc., they will be affected more deeply by the problems mentioned above. In conclusion, I would like to add that this research was a significant milestone in my life, as I was able to investigate and write about a problem that remains taboo in the broader Hungarian and Roma communities.

## 1.2. EDUCATION

Getting a good education is an uphill battle for Roma children. Research by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee<sup>(15)</sup> has found that the segregation of Roma children in education remains a significant issue.

- Only 20% of them attend preschool, compared to a whopping 90% for non-Roma children.
- The literacy rate among Roma adults is approximately 85%, which is significantly lower than the national average of 99%.
- Moreover, less than 30% of Roma students graduate from high school, in stark contrast to the national average of over 85% (European Commission, 2023; Hungarian Ministry of Human Capacities, 2023; Romaversitas Foundation, 2023).



Specific cases, such as the European Court of Human Rights case, *Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary* (2013)<sup>(16)</sup>, highlight ongoing discrimination against Roma children in education. Despite the court ruling in favour of the Roma community, Hungary has not fully implemented the necessary changes.

Based on the Fundamental Rights Agency's Roma survey from 2021, in Hungary in 2016, 60% of the children aged 6–15 attended schools where all or most pupils were Roma, and in 2021, the percentage decreased by 16%. Compared to the other 12 countries surveyed, Hungary is placed among the top 8 on the topic of school segregation.



The right to education is fundamental to human development, yet Roma girls in Hungary are frequently denied equitable access. Economic hardship, compounded by social stigma and discriminatory segregation in schools, severely restricts their educational opportunities. Roma girls are often placed in under-resourced or segregated classrooms, impeding their academic progress and future potential. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Hungary's educational policies for violating Roma children's rights, illustrating the deep-seated inequities within the education system(17). For Roma girls, these barriers are especially damaging, as many are expected to leave school early to contribute to family income.

**Consequently, only 20% of Roma girls complete secondary education compared to over 85% of non-Roma girls, highlighting the enduring impact of educational segregation and discrimination on their life trajectories.**

### 1.2.1. THE EDUCATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN HUNGARY

The right to education is fundamental to human development, yet Roma girls in Hungary are frequently denied equitable access. Economic hardship, compounded by social stigma and discriminatory segregation in schools, severely restricts their educational opportunities. Roma girls are often placed in under-resourced or segregated classrooms, impeding their academic progress and future potential. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Hungary's educational policies for violating Roma children's rights, illustrating the deep-seated inequities within the education system(18). For Roma girls, these barriers are especially damaging, as many are expected to leave school early to contribute to family income. Consequently, only 20% of Roma girls complete secondary education compared to over 85% of non-Roma girls, highlighting the enduring impact of educational segregation and discrimination on their life trajectories.

### 2.2.2. EARLY PREGNANCIES AND SEX EDUCATION

The issue of early pregnancies among Roma girls in Hungary has been researched by Fabri (2024)(19). Accordingly, the percentage of teenagers giving birth in Hungary in 2022 was 16.7 out of 1000, according to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) of Hungary. In several Western countries, this number falls between 2 and 4 thousandths, while the EU average is 7 per thousand. CSO data on underage pregnancies indicates that 29% of them identified as Roma, while 55% as non-Roma. Within Hungary, systemic issues such as school segregation, inadequate sex education, and discrimination directly contribute to early pregnancies among marginalised communities. Notably, early pregnancy often leads to unemployment, school dropout, or premature marriages, with Roma girls facing the highest risk.

Concerning Hungary, Varga-Tóth et al. (2019) point out that the sexuality education in Hungary needs to change, and its quality is lower than the European level. The results of the research highlight that many girls have their first sexual experience before the age of 14, but lack even basic knowledge about sexual issues. Many of them have never had a gynaecological examination, even though they are already having sex.

Even though early school leaving is rather a consequence of adolescent pregnancy, it is important from the legislative aspect, as a lower compulsory age affects incentives for dropping out.

Under Hungarian law, the compulsory school age is currently 16 years; it used to be 18 but was lowered after 2011 (Act CXC of 2011 on national public education). This contributes to the early leaving rates, according to the publication by the EU on education and training monitoring (European Commission, 2022). In 2021, 12.0% of students left education early, which is higher than the improving EU average of 9.7% and the EU's target of 9%. This rate is even higher in the least developed areas and among the Roma community, where it reaches 62.7% compared to 9.9% among non-Roma individuals.

### 1.3. EMPLOYMENT

**Roma people's employment rate sits at about 26%, while the national rate stands at 68%.**

The unemployment rate for Roma is a staggering 52%, much higher than the national average of 4.1%. Additionally, over 60% of Roma report facing discrimination during their job searches (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023; Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2023; Roma Civil Rights Foundation, 2023).

In the labor market, Roma women experience compounded discrimination due to their ethnic and gender identities, leading to widespread economic exclusion.

Often relegated to low-wage, insecure jobs, Roma women work predominantly in informal sectors such as domestic labour and seasonal agriculture, where they receive limited protections. This economic marginalisation traps many Roma women in cycles of poverty, with few opportunities for stable employment or advancement. Despite legal provisions aimed at equal pay, wage disparities persist, with Roma women typically earning far less than their non-Roma counterparts. Discrimination further limits their access to higher-paying roles, perpetuating economic insecurity and reinforcing harmful stereotypes(20).

The gap in earnings between Roma and non-Roma workers in Hungary is huge. On average, Roma workers earn 60% less than their non-Roma counterparts. Socially, about 80% of Roma experience exclusion when trying to access public services and social benefits. Furthermore, approximately 40% of Roma encounter discrimination when seeking healthcare services (World Bank, 2023; Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2023; Autonómia Foundation, 2023).

## 1.4. HOUSING

Housing is a fundamental need and a human right, yet Roma women face persistent obstacles to securing safe, adequate housing. Roma communities are often concentrated in segregated neighbourhoods with poor infrastructure and limited access to essential services. Discriminatory practices in the rental and lending markets make it difficult for Roma women to secure stable housing, relegating many to overcrowded, substandard conditions. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Roma households are twice as likely to live in overcrowded conditions, with 30% lacking basic sanitation. This lack of adequate housing and sanitation imposes additional burdens on Roma women, who often manage household responsibilities, underscoring the urgent need for housing policies that address their specific challenges(21).

Roma communities often face housing challenges. Approximately 35% of them live in segregated settlements with inadequate housing conditions. Additionally, only 60% of Roma households have access to piped water, unlike the nearly universal access among non-Roma households. Roma are at a five times higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to non-Roma (Habitat for Humanity, 2023; European Commission, 2023; Hungarian Roma Parliament, 2023).

## 1.5. WATER AND SANITATION

Access to clean water and sanitation is essential for health and dignity, yet this fundamental right remains inaccessible for many Roma communities, particularly in rural areas. Roma women, typically responsible for managing household water needs, face significant health risks due to inadequate sanitation infrastructure. Many Roma settlements lack direct access to water sources, forcing women to rely on shared or public wells, which are often far from their homes and contaminated. In some regions, Roma women spend hours each day fetching water, a labour-intensive task that limits their participation in education or work, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion(22).





## 1.6. CHALLENGES IN ACQUIRING BIRTH CERTIFICATES

In Hungary, ensuring universal birth registration for Roma children faces significant challenges due to complex registration procedures, discriminatory practices, geographical isolation, and a lack of awareness among marginalised communities. These barriers disproportionately affect Roma women and their families, as they often bear the responsibility for navigating these systems. This results in many Roma children not being registered at birth, severely impacting their access to healthcare, education, and social services. Without legal identity, these children are more vulnerable to exploitation, statelessness, and social exclusion, perpetuating cycles of poverty and hindering their full participation in society.

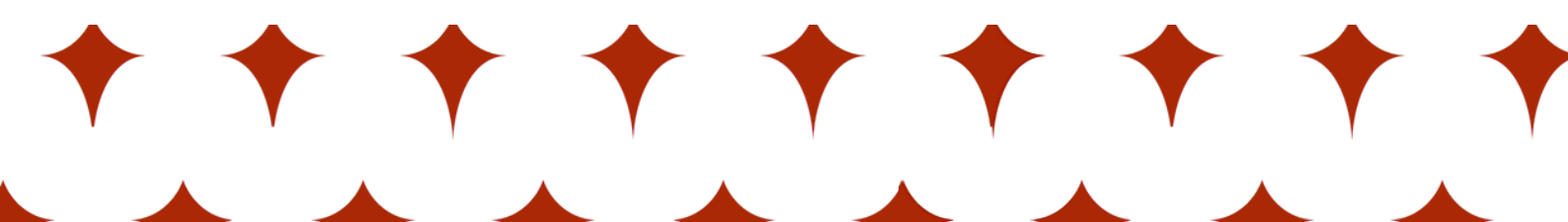
The Hungarian government has taken several steps to ensure universal birth registration, including simplifying the birth registration process to reduce bureaucratic hurdles by minimising the required documentation and streamlining the steps involved in registering a birth. Recognising the unique challenges faced by Roma women, some programs include outreach specifically targeted at Roma communities, where awareness-raising campaigns inform Roma mothers about the importance of birth registration and provide guidance on how to complete the process.

To address geographical barriers, mobile registration units have been deployed in remote and segregated areas, which disproportionately include Roma settlements. These units are especially beneficial to Roma women who may otherwise have to travel long distances while caring for young children or other dependents. Additionally, regulations require hospitals and health professionals to ensure that all births are registered promptly, a measure that supports Roma women giving birth in formal healthcare settings. However, Roma women who give birth at home or in informal conditions may still face significant barriers to registration.

The government collaborates with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assist Roma families, particularly Roma mothers, in navigating the registration process.

**NGOs provide legal aid, language support, and practical assistance to ensure children receive their birth certificates. They also address issues like the lack of initial identification documents, a common problem among Roma families.**

The Hungarian government is increasingly utilising digital technologies to simplify and enhance the accessibility of birth registration.



Parents can now register births online from home through user-friendly websites. Apps have been developed to facilitate birth registration in remote areas, designed to operate offline and upload data later. These systems aim to reduce the workload for Roma women by eliminating the need to visit registration offices. The eBirth System, a nationwide program allowing hospitals to register births electronically, and the Government Gateway Portal for online birth registration are examples of such initiatives. However, Roma communities face unique challenges in accessing these platforms due to the digital divide:

- **Internet access and digital literacy: Many Roma families, particularly women, lack access to the internet or digital devices and are often unfamiliar with how to use online systems.**
- **Roma communities may distrust how their data is used or shared, leading to reluctance in engaging with digital services.**
- **In remote Roma settlements, inadequate internet connectivity hinders the effectiveness of digital registration efforts.**

Mechanisms to close the gap between reported births and the issuance of birth certificates exist, but significant challenges remain, particularly for marginalised children, including Roma. The integrated Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System (CRVS) aims to streamline the registration process and ensure the timely issuance of birth certificates. However, in practice, bureaucratic delays, inefficiencies, and a lack of targeted support for Roma women in rural areas often hinder timely outcomes.

Despite these efforts, Roma women in Hungary continue to face systemic barriers that exacerbate their exclusion from civil registration systems. Tailored interventions, such as providing Roma women with free access to digital tools and literacy training, expanding mobile registration units, and addressing distrust through transparent policies on data use, are essential to achieving universal birth registration and ensuring equal opportunities for Roma children.



## 2. STATUS OF ROMA WOMEN & GIRLS AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION IN HUNGARY

### 2.1. PROTECTION AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

In Hungary, the interests of Roma communities, especially Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ people, are not appropriately taken into account. The country has legal frameworks, such as the Act on National Minorities (Act CLXXIX of 2011), to protect minority rights. However, systemic discrimination persists, and Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals face intersectional challenges due to their identities.

Hungary has a Minority Ombudsman and a National Roma Self-Government (NRSG), but their effectiveness in ensuring political representation for Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals is limited. The NRSG has faced criticism for not adequately representing the interests of Roma people and being overly influenced by the government.

While legal protections exist, such as the Hungarian Constitution and the Equal Treatment Act (CXXV of 2003), they are not consistently enforced when it comes to Roma issues. For example, recent legislative changes affecting education, healthcare, and housing have not adequately considered the needs of Roma women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals.

### 2.2. LEGAL AND POLICY OVERVIEW

Hungary's constitutional protections against discrimination theoretically apply to all citizens, yet Roma women's experiences within the criminal justice system reveal significant gaps between policy and practice. Although the Constitution promotes equality and prohibits discrimination, these protections are inconsistently applied, especially for Roma women. This group often encounters hostility, indifference, or outright bias when seeking justice for crimes committed against them. Hungary's Act on Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities, a law intended to ensure fairness across all sectors, lacks targeted measures addressing Roma-specific issues. As a result, the legal framework fails to capture and address the complex, intersecting oppressions faced by Roma women, making them more vulnerable and less supported within the justice system(23).

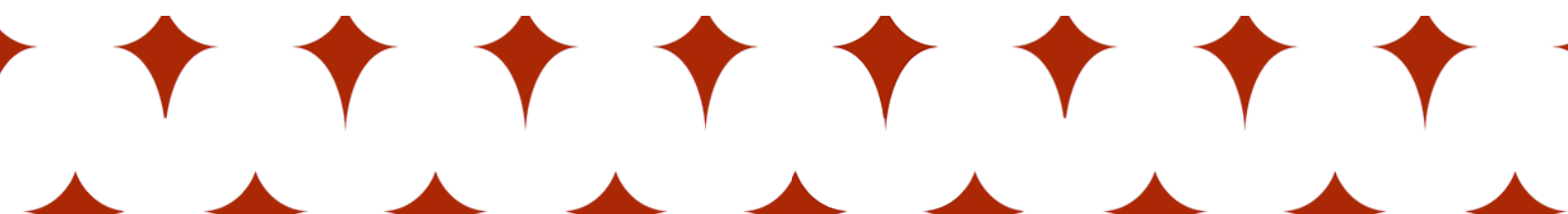
A feminist policy analysis of Hungary's criminal justice approach reveals that the absence of intersectional considerations—recognising both ethnic and gender biases—results in inadequate protection for Roma women. In feminist theory, legal equality requires not only neutrality but also responsiveness to the unique vulnerabilities of marginalised groups. However, Hungary's current policies lack specificity for addressing Roma women's lived realities. The government's reluctance to implement targeted anti-discrimination initiatives signals a gap in recognising intersectionality, a crucial framework for creating effective, inclusive policies. This oversight perpetuates systemic neglect, reinforcing Roma women's exclusion and weakening their ability to assert their rights within the justice system(24).

## 2.3. STATUS OF CRIMES AGAINST ROMA WOMEN AND GIRLS

Roma women face unique and often severe risks, from domestic violence and hate crimes to human trafficking, compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities that increase their susceptibility to these forms of violence. Reports indicate that domestic violence is especially prevalent within Roma communities, yet Roma women face considerable barriers when seeking protection. Social and economic precarity, alongside a lack of cultural sensitivity within law enforcement, means that Roma women are often overlooked or dismissed by authorities, further eroding trust in the criminal justice system(25).

Hate crimes against Roma women are also common, yet they are frequently underreported and often mischaracterised by authorities as mere "personal disputes," despite the evident racial motivations behind the violence. This approach fails to recognise the systemic discrimination that Roma women endure, ignoring their specific vulnerabilities and the compounded impact of ethnic and gender-based violence.

Additionally, the risk of human trafficking remains high for Roma women, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions where traffickers exploit their socio-economic vulnerability(26). A feminist analysis highlights that state policies have not sufficiently addressed or intervened in these systemic threats, reflecting a severe gap in the Hungarian government's approach to protecting marginalised women and underscoring the need for gender-sensitive, anti-racist policing and victim support measures(27).



## 2.4. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL AID

Access to justice is limited for Roma women, who face significant legal and financial barriers to obtaining representation and fair treatment within the justice system. Legal aid services, critical for ensuring equal access, are primarily concentrated in urban areas, making them inaccessible to Roma women residing in rural or isolated regions. This geographical and economic inaccessibility forces many Roma women to rely on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for legal support. Organisations like the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union provide essential assistance; however, these NGOs are under-resourced and unable to meet the high demand for services, leaving many Roma women without adequate representation during legal proceedings.

Within the judicial system, the biases that Roma women encounter are pervasive.



**Testimonies from Roma women are often doubted, minimised, or dismissed, reflecting a lack of cultural understanding and implicit prejudice within legal institutions.**

This bias infringes on their rights to due process and equal protection under the law, contributing to unjust outcomes. From a feminist policy perspective, effective legal support should be tailored to marginalised populations, ensuring that services address the unique barriers faced by Roma women. Furthermore, judicial reform must prioritise intersectional bias training for judges and law enforcement officers, emphasising sensitivity to both ethnic and gender-based discrimination.



## 3. RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY ORGANISING OF ROMA WOMEN IN HUNGARY

**Resilience is a common thread that weaves through the lives of Roma women in Hungary, shaping their response to systemic challenges with strength, solidarity, and a vision for a better future.**

Despite the persistent barriers of ethnic and gender discrimination, Roma women have risen as powerful agents of change, carving spaces for their voices to be heard and their communities to thrive. Their journey is a testament to their unwavering commitment to equality and justice.

Central to this movement are initiatives like the Roma Női Hálózat (Informal Roma Women's Network), Sheja Consulting, and the MARA Program. These efforts not only underscore the resilience of Roma women but also illuminate the transformative potential of community organising and collective action. Together, they represent a mosaic of strategies that challenge prejudice, amplify marginalised voices, and advocate for systemic change. Through education, advocacy, and leadership, these programs exemplify how resilience, when combined with strategic action, can dismantle entrenched inequalities and build a more inclusive society.

### 3.1. INFORMAL ROMA WOMEN'S NETWORK

The Roma Női Hálózat (Informal Roma Women's Network) is a significant informal network in Hungary, playing an important role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Roma women. Their work addresses the intersectional challenges faced by Roma women, who often encounter both gender and ethnic discrimination. By amplifying their voices, the network not only challenges stereotypes but also promotes their active participation in public and political life.

The network engages in a range of impactful activities designed to promote social inclusion and equity. They host events such as the "Roma Women's Advent Tea House," which serves as a cultural and communal gathering, encouraging dialogue and solidarity. Conferences like the "Roma Women's Conference" spotlight the importance of Roma women's representation in decision-making processes and public forums, advocating for systemic change.



The network also takes a public stand, often collaborating with other feminist and Roma-focused groups to influence policy and shape public opinion. Their statements to governmental bodies, such as their recent appeals to the Hungarian EU Presidency, highlight their strategic approach to creating change at institutional levels. Moreover, their participation in protests and civil demonstrations underscores their commitment to ensuring Roma women's voices are heard in broader social and political movements.

Through these various efforts, the Roma Női Hálózati not only uplifts Roma women but also enriches the broader discourse on inclusion, equality, and representation. Their work is significant because it challenges deeply rooted prejudices while fostering a more inclusive society that values diversity and empowers marginalised communities.

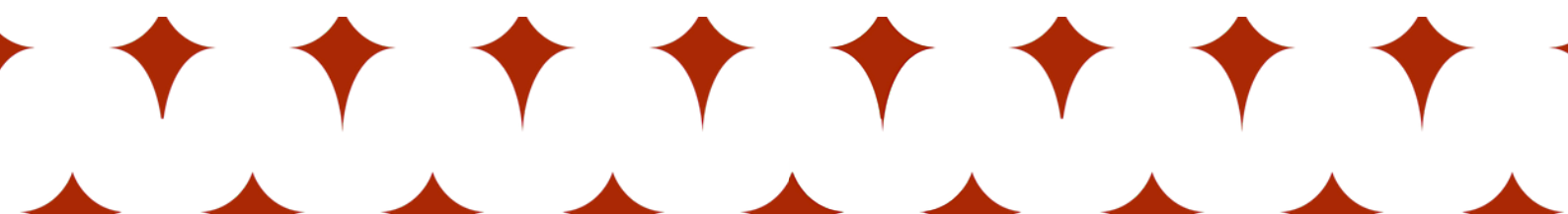
### 3.2. SHEJA CONSULTING

The establishment of Sheja Consulting by two Hungarian Romani women, Judit Ignácz and Nikolett Suha, is a groundbreaking development in the corporate consulting landscape. Their leadership not only brings invaluable personal insights into the challenges faced by Roma women but also serves as a powerful testament to overcoming systemic barriers. This representation is crucial in a context where Roma women have historically encountered significant obstacles in accessing employment opportunities.

In Hungary, Roma women often face intersecting forms of discrimination based on both ethnicity and gender, leading to pronounced exclusion from the labour market. A 2019 report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) highlights that only 16% of Roma women across nine EU countries, including Hungary, are employed, compared to 34% of Roma men. This disparity is attributed to factors such as limited educational opportunities, pervasive discrimination, and socio-economic disadvantages.

By leading Sheja Consulting, Ignácz and Suha not only challenge these entrenched prejudices but also create pathways for greater inclusion and representation within corporate environments. Their consultancy specialises in business communication, leadership development, and corporate Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) training, offering tailored solutions to organisations seeking to enhance their inclusivity.

Their lived experiences and professional expertise uniquely position them to address the nuanced challenges of workplace discrimination and to foster environments where diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. Through their work, they exemplify resilience and serve as role models, inspiring systemic change and empowering future generations of Roma women to pursue and attain equitable employment opportunities.



### 3.3. MARA PROGRAM

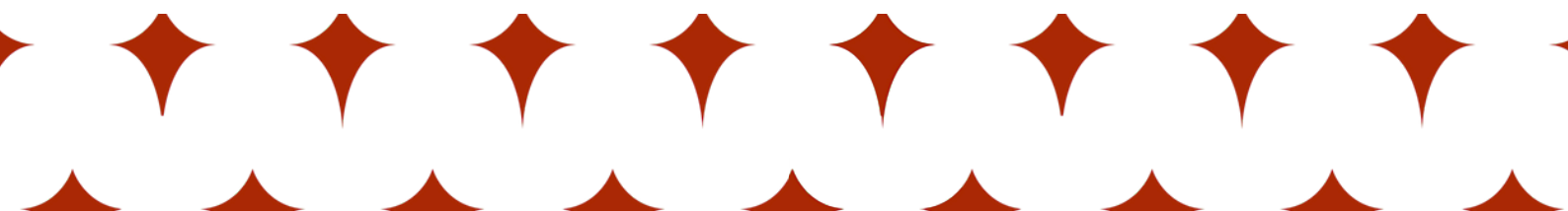
The MARA Program, initiated in 2023 by Romaversitas in partnership with the EMMA Association, is a groundbreaking initiative designed to empower Roma women activists and community organisers in Hungary, particularly in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This program is named after Omara (Oláh Mara), the renowned Roma painter whose work often highlighted critical social issues, and it seeks to create a strong network of Roma women dedicated to advocating for the physical and mental well-being of their communities.

Central to the MARA Program is the establishment of learning and dialogue spaces called MARA Circles. These circles, which began in early 2024 in cities like Miskolc and Budapest, bring together Roma women for monthly sessions to discuss topics related to women's intimate health, fertility, and overall well-being. These sessions provide a platform for education, solidarity, and empowerment, equipping participants with the knowledge and tools needed to drive meaningful change.

Another critical aspect of the program is its research initiative, which culminated in the publication of "Lehetne kicsit halkabban?"/"Could you tone it down a bit?" in March 2024. Authored by five Roma women researchers, this groundbreaking study sheds light on under-researched and often overlooked issues affecting the sexual and reproductive health of Roma women in Hungary. This research serves as both a call to action and a valuable resource for policymakers, healthcare providers, and community advocates.

The MARA Program also emphasises community engagement and activism. Participants of the MARA Circles are encouraged to take their learning back to their communities, implementing projects that promote SRHR awareness and advocate for better access to healthcare services. By fostering leadership and encouraging grassroots initiatives, the program empowers Roma women to be agents of change within their communities.

Overall, the MARA Program is a transformative initiative aimed at advancing gender equality, enhancing health outcomes, and promoting social inclusion for Roma women in Hungary. By addressing systemic barriers to healthcare and championing the voices of Roma women, it strives to create a more equitable and just society.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Institutionalise Intersectional Gender Equality in Policy Design and Implementation

Current policies often fail to consider the compounded marginalisation Roma women face due to their ethnicity and gender. Hungary's legal framework, while promoting equality in principle, does not operationalise intersectionality in practice. Policies addressing Roma women's needs are fragmented and lack enforcement mechanisms.

**Recommendation:** Establish a national framework for intersectional gender equality that mandates all government policies and programs to include ethnic and gender-specific impact assessments. This should involve Roma women's organisations in policymaking processes to ensure authentic representation and accountability.

## 2. Reform Education Systems to Combat Structural Discrimination

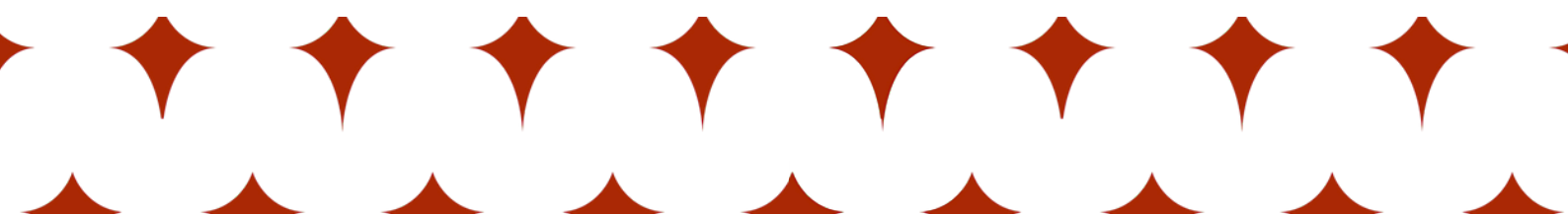
Roma girls face systemic barriers in education, including segregation and the devaluation of their potential, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. The current education system reinforces marginalisation rather than dismantling it.

**Recommendation:** Introduce anti-segregation legislation with strict enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. Develop culturally responsive curricula that include Roma history and culture, integrating Roma feminist narratives. Ensure that Roma women are represented in teaching roles through affirmative action programs and mentorship for aspiring educators.

## 3. Reconfigure Labour Market Policies to Address Intersectional Exclusion

Roma women are disproportionately relegated to precarious, low-wage jobs due to systemic biases and a lack of access to skill-building opportunities. Existing employment policies often prioritise tokenistic diversity measures over meaningful inclusion.

**Recommendation:** Develop intersectional labour policies that prioritise the economic empowerment of Roma women. This includes quotas for Roma women in public sector jobs, mandatory diversity training for employers, and government-subsidised childcare to address gendered barriers to work. Facilitate co-created economic initiatives, such as Roma women-led cooperatives, that challenge capitalist hierarchies and promote collective empowerment.



#### 4. Reform Health Policies to Address Reproductive Justice

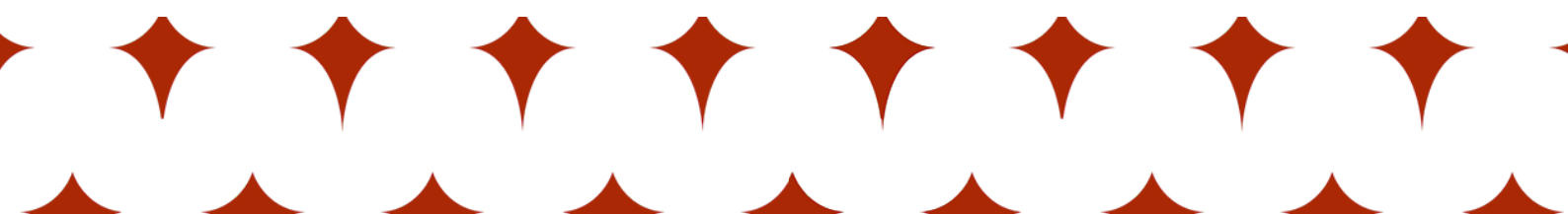
Roma women encounter systemic racism and sexism in healthcare, including limited access to gynaecological care and reproductive health education. State policies often overlook the specific vulnerabilities of Roma women, exacerbating health inequities.

**Recommendation:** Implement community-led health initiatives focusing on reproductive justice. This includes funding Roma women's organisations to provide culturally and linguistically accessible reproductive health education. Establish anti-racism training programs for healthcare professionals to eliminate bias and discrimination in healthcare settings. Ensure universal access to affordable contraception, menstrual products, and maternal care for Roma women.

#### 5. Advance Political Representation and Leadership Development for Roma Women

The exclusion of Roma women from political and administrative roles perpetuates their systemic marginalisation and renders their perspectives invisible in decision-making processes. Current policies fail to disrupt the patriarchal and ethnocentric power structures dominating political spaces.

**Recommendation:** Introduce legislative quotas requiring a minimum representation of Roma women in national and local political bodies. Establish Roma women's leadership academies to promote political engagement and cultivate future leaders. Fund grassroots feminist organisations that challenge patriarchal norms within Roma communities and advocate for systemic change.



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