

Input to EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

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1. General context

Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the EU Anti-Poverty call for input.

This submission uses the term “Discrimination based on Work and Descent” to include caste-based discriminatory practices, as stated in CERD General Recommendation 29, which held that “descent” in ICERD Article 1(1) covers caste-based discrimination. CERD affirmed that discrimination based on “descent” includes caste and analogous systems of inherited status, impairing human rights.

GFoD represents these historically marginalized and systemically excluded communities facing caste and analogous forms of discrimination, such as (but not limited to) Dalit communities in South Asia, Roma community in Europe, Quilombola and Palenque community in Latin America, Haratin, Osu and other similarly oppressed communities in Africa—known as Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD). These groups, while distinct, share a common experience of systemic discrimination compounded by intersecting factors.

An estimated 270 million people globally belong to communities who face discrimination based on work and descent. Women and girls in these communities experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Discrimination based on work and descent (DWD) focuses, however, on occupational descent, where the position within the social stratification (unlike in racism, the colour of the skin) becomes the core factor of discrimination. DWD is inherently intersectional because it involves multiple overlapping forms of marginalization tied to inherited social status, ancestral occupation, gender, race, and socio-economic factors.

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) are socially stratified groups that endure systemic, inherited, and intergenerational forms of exclusion and marginalization rooted in ancestral occupational roles and caste-like hierarchies.

These forms of discrimination are often legitimized and perpetuated through cultural, religious, and institutional norms, resulting in restricted access to fundamental rights and services, including education, healthcare, political participation, and legal protection. Women and girls in these communities experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and their situation requires dedicated attention and targeted legislative and policy interventions.

2. Introduction

Poverty is a profound, historical, and multidimensional injustice that cannot be explained solely by a lack of income. Among communities subjected to discrimination based on social origin, ancestry, occupation, or location are the Dalits in South Asia, Quilombolas in Latin America, Haratin and Osu in Africa, Burakumin in Japan, and Roma in Europe which is facing similar patterns of issues such as poverty, social exclusion, and invisibility.¹

In CDWD communities, poverty is not merely the result of a lack of economic resources, but is passed down from generation to generation, fuelled by institutional, systemic, and multidimensional practices of discrimination. An estimated 10–12 million Roma live in Europe, making them the continent's largest ethnic minority (Council of Europe, 2019).²

Despite the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy's statement that "addressing poverty is part of a collective effort at global level along the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," Roma communities remain excluded from the EU's SDG vision. Critically, the 2025 Voluntary National Review of the SDGs failed to mention Roma, reflecting persistent gaps in recognition and targeted action needed to uphold the principle of leaving no one behind. This omission undermines efforts to tackle intergenerational poverty and discrimination affecting Roma across Europe.

According to data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2024),³ 70% of Roma are at risk of poverty, compared to just 16% in the general EU population. In other words, the Roma are Europe's poorest ethnic group. Despite decades of Roma Frameworks and projects, the 54-point gap in poverty risk has hardly narrowed. One of the key reasons for this is that many policy interventions target the symptoms rather than the root causes of poverty. The prevailing strategy manages poverty rather than eliminating it, emphasizing social aid instead of a rights-based approach.

To understand the multidimensional and deep-rooted poverty experienced by the Roma and to contextualize it through data, we must examine the following research findings:

- 77% of Roma children in Europe live in households below the poverty line. In the relevant age groups, the EU average is only 19%.
- Over 17% of Roma live in households without running water, and 22% lack proper sanitation⁴. Additionally, 83% reside in overcrowded housing (i.e., inadequate room space relative to the number of inhabitants).⁵

¹ GFoD, Tortocoi, S., Gautam, N., & Johankutty, D. (2024). *Poverty and discrimination among women from communities discriminated on work and descent (DWD): Understanding the many faces of poverty*. Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD) <https://globalforumcdwd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Poverty-Report-GFOD-pages-v2-1.pdf>

² Council of Europe. (2019, October 17). *Extreme poverty afflicts many of the 10–12 million Roma in Europe*. Council of Europe – Roma and Travellers. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/-/extreme-poverty-afflicts-many-of-the-10-12-million-roma-in-europe>

³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2024). *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/roma-rights-2024>

⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2022). *Roma survey 2021 – Main results*. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

⁵ ERGO Network. (2025, October 17). *Ending Roma poverty in the EU: Position paper*. ERGO Network. <https://ergonetnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ERGO-Network-Ending-Roma-poverty-in-the-EU-Position-paper-FINAL.pdf>

- At least 10% of the nearly 6 million Roma living in EU countries have no access to electricity.⁶ In Spain, 45% of the Roma population experiences moderate or severe energy poverty.⁷
- Only 54% of Roma aged 20–64 are in paid employment, which is 20 percentage points below the EU average.
- 36% of Roma report experiencing overt discrimination during job-seeking processes; in some countries, this figure exceeds 80%.⁸
- The European Environmental Bureau (EEB, 2020) documented that Roma communities in over 30 areas are systematically deprived of basic rights such as water, sanitation, and waste management.

As the data clearly show, the poverty experienced by Roma in Europe is not merely economic, it is multidimensional, sustained by structural systems, and transmitted intergenerationally by design rather than by accident.

Therefore, the European Commission’s anti-poverty strategies must address the situation of Roma not only as a matter of social policy but as an issue of human rights and equality. Otherwise, the European Pillar of Social Rights risks remaining merely aspirational.

3. A Human Rights-Based Approach to Combating Poverty

Poverty is not just a lack of income; it is the absence of justice in access to fundamental rights and services. This injustice, with deep institutional and historical roots, is continuously reproduced by economic systems that sustain capital accumulation while perceiving equality as a threat.

The primary catalyst that deepens and sustains Roma poverty in Europe is antigypsyism. Antigypsyism codes Roma as “the other” and “unworthy of rights,” legitimizing inequalities in social aid, employment, and education.

According to the 2025 position paper by ERGO, the systematic nature of Roma poverty manifests in the following areas:

- Exclusion from social protection systems;
- Barriers to accessing basic services like housing, water, and sanitation;
- Inaccessibility to healthcare, particularly reproductive health services;
- Segregated educational structures;
- Disenfranchisement due to the digital divide;
- Institutional biases in accessing justice.

Roma poverty is often presented as a result of individual failure or cultural destiny. However, this narrative obscures the real, structural causes of poverty by rendering systemic inequalities

⁶ Holt, E. (2023, January 5). *European energy crisis hits Roma populations hard*. Global Issues. <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2023/01/05/32756>

⁷ Chuquitarco-Morales, A., La Parra-Casado, D., & Estévez-García, J. F. (2023). *Energy poverty and self-rated health among Roma population and general population in Spain*. Gaceta Sanitaria. Advance online publication. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38141574/>

⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2025). *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries – Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

invisible. Roma poverty is not the product of individual choices but of policy-driven systemic exclusion.

Thus, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy must be shaped not only in economic terms but also through the lens of racial justice and social equality. It must build strong synergy between the EU Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation Framework and the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan. The goal should not merely be to “reduce Roma poverty by 50% by 2030”; this target must be supported by binding and measurable indicators. To achieve this:

- Ethically collect disaggregated data by ethnicity, gender, and age;
- Involve Roma civil society in monitoring processes;
- Define specific budget lines for Roma poverty within the EU Social Fund+ (ESF+).

A genuine poverty alleviation policy is impossible without eradicating racism and institutional exclusion.

4. The Intergenerational Cycle of Poverty

Roma poverty is like a chain. Economic exclusion, educational deprivation, and spatial segregation are interconnected links. According to FRA’s 2024 data, 77% of Roma children live below the poverty line, almost four times the EU average.

More alarmingly, poverty and social exclusion affect children even before birth, transmitting disadvantage from the very beginning of life. Low birth weight (under 2,500 grams), often linked to poor nutrition, is a major concern in Roma communities in Southeast Europe. Roma infants are almost twice as likely to be born underweight compared to other groups. These disparities persist into infancy and early childhood; for instance, undernutrition, measured by height-for-age, affects Roma children six times more in Serbia and three times more in North Macedonia than the general population.⁹

This cycle continues into childhood. Only 53% of Roma children attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), compared to 95% in the general population (FRA, 2025). This educational inequality leads to long-term disadvantages in literacy, employment, and income. In Türkiye, where Roma, Dom, and Abdal communities face compounded exclusion, primary school attendance drops to 72% for Roma girls and 65% for boys, while only 15% of girls and 8% of boys reach upper secondary education.¹⁰

The impacts of childhood poverty extend into adulthood. Children raised in deprivation are more likely to face unemployment, poor health, and limited civic participation as adults, recreating the very conditions they were born into. This is not a failure of individuals or families. It is the predictable result of policy failures, institutional neglect, and structural antigypsyism.

⁹ UNICEF Sirbistan. (2007). Breaking the cycle of exclusion: Roma children in South East Europe. <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/7516/file/Breaking%20the%20cycle%20of%20exclusion.pdf>

¹⁰ Koç, İ. Saraç, M. Abbasoğlu-Özgören, A. ve Çağatay, P. (2024) Türkiye Roman Nüfus Araştırması, TÜBİTAK ve Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü, Ankara. <https://www.romaar.com/egitim-durumu.html>

Breaking these cycles requires a life-course approach to poverty reduction. Early childhood interventions must be coupled with parental support, inclusive education, and accessible healthcare. The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should prioritize:

- Universal and inclusive early childhood education for Roma children;
- Nutrition and maternal health programs targeting Roma women;
- Anti-segregation policies in schools and neighborhoods;
- Community-based family support services co-designed with Roma organizations.

Poverty that begins before birth can only be dismantled through lifelong investment—from maternal care to adult education. Ending intergenerational Roma poverty is not only a social goal, but a moral and democratic imperative for the European Union.

5. The Feminization of Poverty

The poverty experienced by Roma women is a multi-layered injustice at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class. Their poverty is not only a matter of income, but also of violence, exclusion, and invisibility.

Across the EU, employment rates for Roma women remain dramatically lower than those for men and the general population. FRA (2024) data show that Roma women are employed at a rate 31 percentage points lower than Roma men, and far below the EU average for women overall. Where employment exists, it is often informal, low-paid, and insecure, such as waste collection, street vending, domestic cleaning, day labor, and seasonal agricultural work. These jobs lack contracts, pensions, and health insurance, reinforcing economic dependency and limiting mobility.

In Türkiye, research by the Roma Memory Studies Association (2024)¹¹ found that Roma women are overwhelmingly concentrated in the informal sector, making them vulnerable to exploitation and excluding them from social protection schemes. Many Roma women who lost their jobs after the 2023 earthquakes were denied access to relief services and housing, with some still living in tents or makeshift shelters months later. These experiences show how gender, ethnicity, and class intersect to intensify vulnerability during crises.

Health disparities further entrench the feminization of poverty. On average, Roma women live 11 years less than women in the general population.¹² They are more likely to experience segregation in maternity wards, abuse by medical staff, and lack access to reproductive healthcare. In North Macedonia, 71% of Roma women have experienced psychological, physical, or sexual violence by intimate partners. Yet, most are unable to seek legal or medical help due to poverty, lack of documentation, or distrust of institutions.

Cultural stereotypes also reinforce exclusion. Roma women are often portrayed as “dependent,” “uneducated,” or “unfit” for stable employment, justifying their exclusion from

¹¹ Gül, S., Orun, P., Gezici, D., & Zengin, D. (2024). 6 Şubat 2023 Kahramanmaraş depremlerinin Malatya’da Dom ve Abdal kadınlar üzerindeki etkilerinin afet adaleti ve toplumsal cinsiyet bağlamında incelenmesi. Roman Hafıza Çalışmaları Derneği.

¹² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2022). Roma survey 2021 – Main results. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

formal labor markets and public life. This narrative creates a vicious cycle: poverty limits access to education and employment, and the lack of these opportunities sustains poverty.

Addressing the feminization of Roma poverty requires more than gender mainstreaming—it demands gender justice. The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should:

- Embed gender equality in all Roma-related policies;
- Ensure Roma women have equal access to education, training, and decent work;
- Expand social protection coverage for informal workers, particularly women;
- Develop community-based programs to prevent gender-based violence;
- Support Roma women's leadership and representation in decision-making spaces.

A rights-based poverty strategy cannot succeed without dismantling the gendered structures that keep Roma women on the margins. Empowering Roma women is not only about equality, it is essential for breaking the broader cycle of Roma poverty in Europe.

6. Energy Poverty

Access to energy is a fundamental human right and an indicator of social justice. However, at least 10% of the approximately 6 million Roma living in EU countries have no access to electricity. This means that thousands of Roma households still live in darkness in modern Europe.

Roma settlements are often located in areas excluded from urban planning and lack infrastructure. Lack of access to electricity results not only in a deprivation of heating and lighting, but also deep inequalities in education, healthcare, food security, and hygiene. Energy poverty has become a form of structural exclusion that directly impacts the quality of life, making Roma communities environmentally and socially more vulnerable.

One of the most striking examples is found in Spain: approximately 45% of the Roma population lives in moderate to severe energy poverty. Power cuts can last for weeks, and some neighbourhoods are systematically disconnected from the grid under the pretext of "illegal use." This represents both social punishment and a violation of the right to housing.

The impact of energy poverty is even more severe on women. It increases the burden of care in the household and negatively affects children's health and education. Therefore, it is also a gender-based inequality.

The EU's poverty alleviation policies must approach access to energy not merely as a technical issue, but as a matter of human dignity. Integrating Roma settlements into energy infrastructure, supporting renewable community energy models, and holding energy companies accountable for human rights should be central elements of this process.

7. Conclusions

Poverty affecting Roma and related Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) is deep-seated and systemic, rooted in inherited social hierarchies. This population category includes Roma, Dalit, and Haratin diaspora communities. For these groups, poverty

is defined not merely by the absence of income, but by the denial of dignity, opportunity, and essential access to education, decent work, housing, and justice. The extreme nature of this exclusion is evidenced by the finding that Roma communities in Europe face some of the highest poverty rates, with 70–80% living below poverty thresholds. This situation is sustained by discrimination based on work and descent, ethnicity, caste, and gender, which acts as a major cause of poverty, restricting access to resources, education, employment, and equal participation, thereby trapping generations in stigmatized, low-status livelihoods. To effectively address these structural issues, Roma must be specifically and explicitly included in all anti-poverty strategies. Furthermore, tackling intersectional discrimination is vital to ensure that vulnerable subgroups, such as Roma women, youth, and migrants, are actively included and not left behind.

Despite the existence of various measures, significant gaps persist in policy implementation and inclusion. For example, assessments indicate that Roma children are frequently excluded from national Child Guarantee initiatives, sometimes resulting in participation rates as low as 27% to 35%. Similarly, evaluations concerning the effectiveness of EU youth measures have affirmed that Roma youth remain significantly underrepresented in both decision-making processes and participation within related European Union schemes. Overcoming this exclusion requires learning from past successes, where effective anti-poverty policies for Roma have consistently combined legal protection against discrimination, inclusive education, targeted job training, community participation, and guaranteed access to social services. Key enablers for these successful outcomes have included sustained political commitment and cross-sector collaboration.

To move forward, the strategy must prioritize robust legal protection against both antigypsyism and descent- and work-based discrimination, coupled with strengthened anti-discrimination enforcement. The Commission is tasked with monitoring discriminatory evictions and implementing rapid response teams to combat immediate street-level discrimination. Beyond legal measures, targeted investment in excluded communities must be promoted to guarantee access to quality jobs, education, and housing. This requires strengthening funding for Roma inclusion strategies by actively integrating anti-poverty mechanisms and ensuring that CDWD-led organizations, including Roma organizations, receive direct funding. Furthermore, capacity-building in municipalities must be supported, ensuring targeted investment in housing and legal aid, and providing anti-bias training for frontline workers to prevent exclusion and improve critical service delivery. Finally, the collection of disaggregated data is essential to effectively monitor progress and accurately target interventions.

Specific actions must also focus on eliminating the barriers facing the youngest members of these communities. The Child Guarantee must be strengthened by explicitly prioritizing Roma, Dalit, and CDWD children. Efforts must be focused on tackling school segregation and increasing access to early childhood care and education. Crucially, there must be active outreach and removal of existing barriers to accessing necessary health, nutrition, and social services for the most marginalized children

8. Policy Recommendations

1. Reframe Roma Poverty as a Question of Structural Justice, Not Welfare

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should move beyond a welfare-oriented logic and treat poverty as a structural injustice demanding systemic repair. Roma deprivation must be analysed in connection with discriminatory land, labour, and housing systems that have historically marginalised CDWD communities. Ending Roma poverty therefore requires redistributive policies that correct historical imbalances and promote economic democracy, not only social inclusion.

2. Establish a Roma Social Justice and Equality Mechanism

Instead of embedding Roma issues as a subtheme, the Strategy should create a Roma Social Justice and Equality Mechanism (RSJEM) under the European Pillar of Social Rights. This mechanism would coordinate Member States' anti-poverty actions, ensure coherence with the EU Roma Strategic Framework, and evaluate social policy decisions through a justice-based lens rather than mere statistical progress.

3. Address Spatial and Environmental Dimensions of Poverty

Roma communities frequently live in segregated or polluted areas with limited access to clean water, waste management, and safe housing. The Anti-Poverty Strategy must recognise environmental injustice as a determinant of poverty and allocate Green Transition funds to rehabilitate Roma settlements. Investments in climate adaptation, clean energy, and infrastructure should prioritise communities historically excluded from environmental protection.

4. Create Community-Led Monitoring and Accountability Systems

Traditional top-down evaluations fail to capture lived realities. The EU should fund community-led monitoring platforms led by Roma NGOs, universities, and local councils to track access to social protection, housing, and healthcare. This participatory model would allow Roma communities to act as co-producers of knowledge, ensuring that policy evaluation reflects lived experience rather than administrative reporting.

5. Develop a European Roma Knowledge and Data Hub

The persistent “data invisibility” surrounding Roma poverty perpetuates exclusion. A European Roma Knowledge and Data Hub, co-managed by FRA and Roma civil society, should centralise disaggregated statistics, field studies, and qualitative reports. Beyond numbers, it should capture narratives of exclusion, resilience, and resistance — turning Roma research into an active policy instrument.

6. Integrate Economic Rights into the Heart of Anti-Poverty Policy

Economic inequality cannot be addressed through social aid alone. The Strategy should integrate economic rights—fair wages, access to credit, ownership of housing and land—into poverty reduction frameworks. Member States must ensure Roma access to social economy

programmes, microfinance, and cooperative ownership models, strengthening long-term community autonomy and wealth creation.

7. Advance Gender-Responsive and Care-Oriented Policies

Roma women's poverty cannot be resolved without transforming care systems. The Strategy should adopt care as an economic and social right, recognising unpaid care and domestic labour performed by Roma women. Policies should invest in community childcare, women's employment pathways, and gender-responsive budgeting that values care work as a cornerstone of poverty eradication.

8. Secure Long-Term, Flexible Funding for Roma Self-Determination

Short-term, project-based funding undermines sustainability. The EU should create multi-year, flexible financing streams that directly support Roma-led organisations, community cooperatives, and local resilience networks. Funding criteria must prioritise trust, continuity, and local ownership, enabling Roma communities to define their own anti-poverty strategies.

9. Embed Intersectionality and Human Rights in Policy Design

The Strategy must mandate Intersectional Human Rights Impact Assessments (IHRIA) for all EU and national programmes. This would assess not only who benefits or is excluded, but how overlapping identities—gender, ethnicity, disability, migration status—shape vulnerability. Such assessments would ensure that anti-poverty actions reduce structural discrimination rather than reproducing it.

10. Institutionalise Co-Decision with Roma Civil Society

Participation must evolve into co-decision-making. Roma organisations should hold formal, decision-making seats within EU and national anti-poverty coordination structures. Their expertise—rooted in lived experience—should guide programme design, evaluation, and resource allocation. The Strategy must guarantee shared governance, not symbolic consultation, as a democratic principle.

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