



MONITORING REPORT

on the implementation of the Convention
on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women (CEDAW), with a main focus on
Roma Women and Girls



ЛУЛУДИ

Ромска Асоцијација за Жени и Млади
Romani Asocijacija Dzuvijsenge thaj Ternenge
Roma Women and Youth Association

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1. Introduction

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a fundamental international legal instrument focusing on protection and promotion of women's rights. By ratifying it, member states commit themselves to undertaking respective measures aimed at preventing all forms of direct and indirect discrimination, hence ensuring comprehensive development and advancement of women and equal exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms alongside men.

The Convention encompasses civil and political rights (such as the right to vote, equality before the law and the right to citizenship), as well as economic, social, and cultural rights (including the right to work, education, healthcare and other rights related to economic and social life).

CEDAW was adopted by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180 on December 18th 1979 and became effective on September 3rd 1981 in conformity with Article 27(1) of the Convention.¹

The Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) also signed and ratified this Convention on January 18th 1994 and is accordingly obligated to adhere to it and implement it in practice. Since then, the state has submitted a total of six periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention provisions. The most recent final observations by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women pertain to the sixth periodic report dating back to November 2018. In 2020, the state filed a followup report on the implementation of these observations, whereas in 2021 the Committee sent a notice evaluating the followup.²

Considering that Roma women are among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, this monitoring report / shadow report specifically dwells on their situation. The report showcases a brief analysis of the implementation of the Committee's recommendations with a particular focus on the rights and conditions of Roma women and assessment of the progress, challenges and manners in which their situation could be improved.

1 United Nations, Human Rights Instruments

2 UN Treaty Body Database, Reporting status for North Macedonia

In this context, the analysis shall be based on the Committee's final observations and recommendations, which are structured around several thematic areas directly related to the status of women, including Roma women. The areas are as follow: legal and institutional framework, gender stereotypes, traditional norms and harmful practices, gender-based violence and victim protection, human trafficking, women's engagement in political and public life, economic empowerment, employment, education and healthcare, as well as the situation of women from rural areas, Roma women and women of other marginalized groups.

Consequently, the following section presents a brief overview of the implementation of these recommendations in relevant domains, with a particular emphasis on how they actually affect the lives of Roma women, what obstacles impede the exercise of their rights and what measures are deemed necessary for improving their situation. In that regard, it is useful to take into consideration relevant demographic data. According to the latest national census in the Republic of North Macedonia, conducted in 2021, a total of **46,433** individuals identified themselves as Romani (23,630 men and 22,803 women), amounting for **2.53%** of the overall resident population of 1,836,713 people.³ The geographical distribution of the Romani population shows the largest communities residing in: Skopje (18,498 Romani people), Prilep (3,966), Bitola (2,890), Kumanovo (2,795), Shtip (2,301), Gostivar (2,273), Kichevo (2,003), Kochani (1,892), Tetovo (1,885) and Debar (1,140).

Such statistics are essential as a benchmark when analyzing Roma women's access to rights, public services and institutional support due to the fact that they serve as a starting point in evaluating their actual status at both local and national levels.

3 State Statistical Office, https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooopstenie.aspx?rbtxt=146&utm_source

2. Methodological Approach

The monitoring shall provide a systematic assessment of the progress and challenges in implementing international standards aiming at enhancing institutional response and public policies related to gender equality and protection against genderbased violence.

Some of the key objectives of the monitoring include:

- » Assessing the alignment of national and local policies with the CEDAW recommendations—especially regarding prevention and protection against discrimination and establishment of equal opportunities.
- » Evaluating the capacity of institutions (law enforcement, judiciary, social work centers, healthcare institutions and local authorities) to implement gender equality laws and policies effectively in conformity with the CEDAW recommendations particularly in terms of access to justice and victim support services.
- » Examining the real-world impact of the existing measures on women—especially vulnerable groups—aligned with CEDAW recommendations for elimination of intersecting forms of discrimination and ensuring full access to rights and services (including access to shelters, free legal aid, psychosocial support and healthcare services).
- » Generating evidence-based recommendations for improving public policies based on the monitoring obtained results consistent with CEDAW requirements for strengthening measures to prevent discrimination against women.

The monitoring was conducted through desk research related to the fulfillment of obligations at the national level (by means of perusal of laws, strategies and protocols), field research (interviews with municipal representatives and focus groups with Roma girls and women) and drafting a report with the main findings, conclusions and recommendations, which were also communicated at the local level.

2.1. Desk Research (National Level)

The desk research was performed by perusing laws, strategies, action plans, existing analyses and reports from state institutions and civil society organizations, as well as other publicly available information. To this end, a **Monitoring Questionnaire for the CEDAW Recommendations** was compiled, containing a set of questions for office-based analysis to assess, from a legislative perspective, how the recommendations from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, addressed to Macedonia at the end of 2018, are being implemented in relation to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (also known as the CEDAW Convention). (*See Annex 1*)

The data from the desk research refer to the legal framework, access to justice, national mechanisms for the empowerment of women, education, employment, healthcare and engagement in public life. Such data are expected to provide an overview of how the recommendations given by the monitoring body of the Convention are being implemented at the national level.

For the purpose of obtaining additional data that could not be sourced from publicly available information, the tool **Request for Access to Public Information** was used and submitted to the appropriate holders of public information.

2.2. Field Research

In order to gain an understanding of the situation at the local level, interviews were conducted with municipal representatives and focus groups with Roma girls and women.

The focus groups were organized by local civil society organizations, members of the informal **Roma's Women's Rights Network**⁴, led by the Roma Women and Youth Association Luludi, with the participation of at least seven Roma women in each of the following municipalities: the **City of Skopje, Berovo, Bitola, Sveti Nikole, Shtip, Gostivar, and Shuto Orizari**. (*Focus Group Discussion Guide – see Annex 2*).

The interviews with the municipal representatives were organized in the municipal premises. The meetings were mainly held with the Gender Equality Coordinator and/or other municipal representatives. The questionnaire used for the interviews with the municipal representatives is provided in **Annex 3**.

The first draft of the report was communicated with the municipal representatives in order to reaffirm the findings and incite joint activities with civil society organizations in compliance with the recommendations.

4. Roma's Women's Rights Network is an informal network for monitoring, reporting and advocacy for the Roma women's rights. More information is available at the following [link](#).

3. Visibility of the Convention, the Optional Protocol and the General Recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Despite the fact that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is an integral part of the legal system of the Republic of North Macedonia, awareness of it—as well as of the Optional Protocol and the general recommendations of the Committee—still remains low. Their visibility and recognition among the public and professionals continue to be limited.

The research indicates insufficient knowledge and limited application of the Convention and its mechanisms by the general public, institutions, and judicial bodies. Furthermore, Roma women and other marginalized groups (women from rural areas, migrant women, refugees, and women with disabilities) have significantly less access to information about their rights and the protection mechanisms stemming from the Convention.

Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of coordinated, national, and comprehensive campaigns aimed at raising public awareness about the Convention and the protection mechanisms it offers. Meanwhile, the available reports indicate that Roma women encounter barriers in accessing legal aid and institutional protection, which further diminishes the effectiveness of UN instruments in protecting their rights in practice. T

his pinpoints the need for systematic efforts to promote, educate about, and bring the Convention and its related mechanisms closer to all women, and in particular those most affected by multiple forms of discrimination.

4. Thematic Overview of the Situation, Challenges and Needs of Women, with a Focus on Roma Women

4.1 National Legal Framework and Protection against Discrimination

The situation in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the issue of prevention of discrimination, gender-based violence and provision of equal opportunities indicates certain progress, predominantly in the legislative sphere. However, implementation remains a challenge, particularly when it comes to vulnerable and marginalized groups, including ⁵ roma women.

According to the 2024 European Commission Report on North Macedonia, the country has made satisfactory progress in the area of Roma inclusion, implementing the 2022-2030 Roma Inclusion Strategy. New action plans for 2024/2025 have been drawn up, and a Roma Inclusion Advisor has been appointed to assist the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the strategy lacks a clear approach as regards participation, empowerment, and capacity-building. The Action Plan for the protection, promotion and fulfillment of the human rights of Roma women and girls is being implemented only partially. Structural challenges persist, such as irregular school attendance, presence of children on the streets, and segregation in education, all of which directly affect the opportunities for equal integration and the protection of rights.

In this context, the most relevant laws, strategies and action plans aimed at promoting gender equality, preventing discrimination and improving the situation of vulnerable groups—including Roma women and girls—are presented hereunder:

- In the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination⁶ adopted in October 2020, under Article 5 it is set out that any form of discrimination is prohibited on various grounds, including sex, gender, national or ethnic origin, gender identity, affiliation with a marginalized group, etc.

5. 2024 European Commission Report on North Macedonia, page. 46

6. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 258 dated 30.10.2020

It is important to note that this law also recognizes and defines multiple, repetitive, prolonged and intersectional discrimination. Hence, under Article 4 the following definitions are provided: Point 10 defines “multiple discrimination” as discrimination exerted against a person or group on multiple discriminatory grounds; Point 11 defines “repetitive discrimination” as discrimination exerted against a person or group occurring on multiple occasions, on the same discriminatory grounds; Point 12 defines “prolonged discrimination” as continuous discrimination exerted against a person or group over an extended period of time; whereas Point 13 defines “intersectional discrimination” as any occurrence of discrimination based on two or more discriminatory grounds that are simultaneously and intrinsically linked.

It is especially important to highlight that the legislation acknowledges multiple, repetitive, prolonged, and intersectional discrimination, as Roma women are oftentimes victims of these types of discrimination..

- ▶ **he Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**⁷ was adopted in January 2021 and became effective three months later. Under Article 5 of this law it is explicitly stated that “Gender-based violence against women is discrimination against women that restricts their ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men”.
- ▶ **The Law on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women**,⁸ establishes the foundation for protection against discrimination based on sex and promotes the establishment of equal opportunities for men and women in political, economic, social, educational, cultural, health, civic and all other areas of social life. Nonetheless, the effective implementation of the obligations under this law remains a challenge—particularly in terms of recognizing and addressing the specific barriers that restrict Roma women’s access to education, employment, healthcare and involvement in public life.
- ▶ **The 2022-2027 Gender Equality Strategy** ⁹ accompanied by the 2022-2024 National Action Plan for Gender Equality (NAPGE), is a document that outlines the implementation of the 2022-2027 National Gender Equality Strategy, adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia on July 27th 2022. At the time of drawing up this document, the National Action Plan for implementing the Strategy for the remaining years could not be found on the official website of the competent ministry, where other laws, strategies and plans in this field are published. Even though the 2022-2027 Gender Equality Strategy does not have a committed strategic objective exclusively to Roma women, they are recognized as a priority group within the general and specific goals and objectives related to the promotion of gender equality, elimination of gender-based violence and the strengthening of institutional support.

7. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 24 dated 29.01.2021,

8. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, no. 6/2012), no. 166/2014

9. 2022-2027 Gender Equality Strategy, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, no. 170, July 2022

Additionally, the Strategy highlights the importance of collecting data disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and identity for the purpose of enhanced monitoring of the situation and adopting measures that correspond to the specific needs of vulnerable groups. In accordance with the Strategy, the fiscal implications for its implementation shall be included in the operational plans of the relevant ministries based on planned activities, through annual budget planning processes. Moreover, international multilateral and bilateral donors and supporters represent a significant part of the budget planning process.

- ▶ 2022-2026 National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination¹⁰, accompanied by the 2022–2024 Action Plan with a cost estimate for implementation. The Strategy stipulates that, for the attainment of its strategic goals and priorities, financial resources are to be allocated in the annual operational plans and they are to be secured from the horizontal budgets of the institutions competent for its implementation, i.e. from the Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia. Additionally, funds from EU pre-accession instruments and other international organizations, in cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs), shall be used.
- ▶ 2022-2030 Roma Inclusion Strategy¹¹ - For the purpose of improving the situation of the Roma population, in the year 2022 the state adopted a new Roma Inclusion Strategy for the period 2022–2030 as a continuation of the previous Roma Strategy, which was valid from 2014 to 2020. In the 2022-2030 Roma Inclusion Strategy, gender-based violence, domestic violence, and violence against women are not elaborated as a separate priority area. Nonetheless, issues pertaining to Roma women are addressed in several parts. The Strategy distinguishes Roma women as an exceptionally vulnerable group exposed to double discrimination — both on the basis of gender and ethnicity. It is noted that they have limited access to healthcare services due to financial and physical barriers, with pronounced low levels of awareness about reproductive health, frequent teenage pregnancies and fear of judgment on the part of healthcare workers. In this context, the Strategy encompasses specific measures aimed at improving the reproductive health of Roma women, such as: increasing the number of patronage nurses' home visits to pregnant Roma women, ensuring equal access to the right to abortion and establishing counseling centers for sexual and reproductive health for women at social risk. Furthermore, it foresees provision of legal aid to victims reporting police brutality occurrences, though it does not specify whether this is applicable to women victims of domestic or gender-based violence. The topic of discrimination is evident in areas such as employment and healthcare, but without an explicit focus on gender-based or domestic violence as distinct forms. While the document does recognize Roma women as a marginalized group and addresses issues regarding their health and access to services, gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against women are not specifically treated as specific topics or addressed through targeted measures. This represents a significant shortcoming, given the vulnerability of this group. The Strategy could be enhanced by including measures for the prevention and protection against

10. 2022-2026 National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination)

11. Стратегија за инклузија на Ромите (2022-2030), page.53,

gender-based and domestic violence, as well as support for Roma women who are victims.

- 2022-2024 National Action Plan for the Protection, Promotion, and Fulfillment of the Human Rights of Roma Women and Girls¹² - The anticipated outcomes of this Action Plan are to bring about substantial changes in several areas of the lives of Roma women and girls. One of the key objectives is to boost the economic independence of Roma women by creating employment opportunities, access to the labor market and support for entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, the Plan is aimed at ensuring conditions for completing and continuing formal education, which in turn would contribute to improving their educational outcomes and personal development. The Plan also envisages strengthening the protection system against all forms of gender-based and domestic violence, with a particular focus on Roma women as an exceptionally vulnerable group. Additionally, it is set to improve access to justice through rights-awareness initiatives and enhanced legal protection mechanisms. In the healthcare area, the Plan envisages measures to improve access to healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare, tailored to the specific needs of Roma women.

The National Action Plan clearly and systematically addresses gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against women, embedding these as one of the strategic objectives and defining specific outcomes to be attained. Within the strategic objective of advancing intersectional justice, the Plan stipulates a specific outcome aimed at improving effective protection for Roma women from all forms of gender-based and domestic violence. This section of the document also includes a series of measures and activities targeted at providing concrete support for Roma women and girls who are victims of violence. The envisaged measures include: establishing Romani-language services and support in the existing or new centers for victims of domestic violence; providing Romani-language support through a dedicated SOS helpline; as well as offering financial assistance to victims living in rental housing, including support for rent and payment of utilities. Simultaneously, awareness-raising activities are foreseen regarding the legal framework and repercussions of child marriages, alongside with the regular collection and publication of data on such marriages, with a specific emphasis on the Roma community. Unlike other strategic documents where these issues are marginalized or mentioned only indirectly, the issues related to violence against Roma women and girls are the focal point of this Action Plan, hence offering a structured and comprehensive approach that includes prevention, protection, support and institutional monitoring. In accordance with the Progress Report for North Macedonia, the implementation of this Action Plan is proceeding at a moderate pace.¹³

Nevertheless, despite the structured nature and targeted objectives of the Action Plan, it lacks a comprehensive financial framework, i.e. there are no cost estimates for the implementation of the foreseen activities, which could pose a risk to the effective realization of its measures.

12. 2020-2024 National Action Plan for the Protection, Promotion, and Fulfillment of the Human Rights of Roma Women and Girls

13. European Commission Progress Report on North Macedonia for 2024, page 46

The Action Plan stipulates development of an evaluation report on the implementation of the NAP, along with a new NAP. The final evaluation report is to be completed and published no later than January 31st 2025. At the time of drafting this Report, no public release of either the evaluation report or the new NAP was found.

- ▶ 2024-2026 National Action Plan for Open Government Partnership¹⁴ - Within the framework of this Plan, the topics of gender-based violence, domestic violence and legal protection of vulnerable groups, including Roma men and women, are addressed under the priority area “Legal Empowerment and Access to Justice.” Commitment 3.2 specifically dwells on the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence. The emphasis is placed on improving protection mechanisms and access to justice for victims, enhancing inter-institutional coordination and boosting transparency. Despite the fact that the document excerpt does not include any comprehensive data, this commitment represents a clear recognition of the need to act in this specific area. Under Commitment 3.1, the focus is on digitalization and improvement of the free legal aid system, which in turn may indirectly enhance access to justice for women victims of violence and other marginalized groups, including Roma men and women. The document does not contain a specific commitment explicitly identifying Roma or Roma women as a priority group. Nonetheless, through measures related to equal opportunities (Commitment 2.4 – regular publication of gender equality reports) and access to justice, there is potential for indirectly addressing the needs of this community, depending on how inclusively the commitments are implemented.

The commitment is targeted at improving prevention and awareness regarding domestic and gender-based violence. It acknowledges that, despite the existing legislation, women—especially those from vulnerable groups (women from rural areas, ethnic minorities, women with disabilities)—still do not recognize all forms of violence (especially psychological and economic violence), are unaware of the legal protection mechanisms and that the institutions lack sufficient capacity and resources to provide effective protection. The main causes of this situation include: insufficient budgeting for prevention measures, lack of systematic training for the practitioners (law enforcement bodies, courts, prosecutors, social work centers, and healthcare institutions), absence of a national awareness campaign. Despite the legal obligations outlined in the Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, prevention still remains marginalized.

The commitment foresees development of a National Prevention Plan (2024), training of practitioners (2024–2026), design and dissemination of educational and promotional materials, public fora, and information related activities through the law enforcement and judiciary. Training sessions shall be organized for practitioners to upgrade their response, including the implementation of immediate and interim protection measures.

The expected outcomes are as follow: increased public awareness regarding the different types of domestic violence and the rights of victims; an increase in the number of reported cases; strengthened institutional capacities; and establishment of public accountability through the publication of data on reported cases and the undertaken protection measures.

14. 2024-2026 National Action Plan for Open Government Partnership

- 2018-2023 Action Plan for the Implementation of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of the Republic of Macedonia.¹⁵

A new draft Law on Gender Equality, published on the website of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth on May 30th 2023¹⁶, is still not on the parliamentary agenda for perusal.

Despite the existing legislation that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex and ethnicity, Roma women still face limited access to justice. Roma women in the Republic of North Macedonia experience multiple and intersectional discrimination on a daily basis, stemming from both their ethnic background and gender. This dual discrimination significantly impacts all aspects of their lives, including access to education, employment, healthcare and political engagement.

„My friend and I went into a café and sat down. The waiter came at our table and we ordered some juice. Everybody around us got their drinks but us. We waited for something like half an hour, and then we left. Later on we found out that they did not serve Roma people in that café.“

Their awareness of the existence of legal protection mechanisms against discrimination remains low, and non-governmental organizations report that there are barriers to exercising their rights, specifically as regards women from socially marginalized backgrounds.

In this context, insights from 2024 data from the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD) provide a significant overview of how diverse groups, including members of the Roma community, make use of existing protection mechanisms. In 2024, the CPPD received 405 complaints as regards protection against discrimination, of which 351 were filed by individuals, whereas the remainder by legal entities. The gender distribution of complainants is nearly equal: 50.4% were men, and 49.6% women. Regarding ethnic affiliation (among those who disclosed it), 7 complaints were filed by Roma individuals, accounting for 3.1% of all individual complaints where ethnic affiliation was stated. In its 2024 Annual Report, the CPPD indicated that these 7 complaints were filed by members of the Roma community, representing 3.1% of the total number of complaints from individuals who stated their national or ethnic background.¹⁷

15. 2018-2023 Action Plan for the Implementation of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of the Republic of Macedonia

16. <https://shorturl.at/UXN7c>

17. 2024 Annual Report on the operation of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, page 19

The most commonly reported discrimination ground is national or ethnic affiliation. As for the reported discrimination grounds between women and men in 2024: women more frequently than men reported discrimination based on sex, gender, education, age and family or marital status. On the other hand, men more frequently than women filed complaints related to discrimination based on skin color, origin, sexual orientation, and affiliation with a marginalized group, citizenship and disability.¹⁸

*"I believe that people are afraid to report discrimination. I think they know that certain rights of theirs have been violated, but due to the circumstances that they live in, being their salary or their affiliation with a political party, they are afraid of being deprived of any entitlements, such as welfare benefits, minimum guaranteed monetary aid or other benefits. They think that if they stood up and rebelled against a case involving them or their children, then they would be deprived of those rights or they would be fired." - statement given by a youth activist included in the *Analysis of the Perceptions and Viewpoints of Young Roma as Regards Gender (In)Equality, Discrimination and Antigypsyism of the Roma Women and Youth Association, LULUDI, 2023**

18. *ibid.*, page 24

4.2 Access to Justice

Free Legal Aid

Despite the adoption of the new Law on Free Legal Aid in 2019¹⁹, which foresees provision of legal support for vulnerable categories of citizens, access to justice for women, especially those facing gender-based violence, remains limited in practice. Numerous administrative and practical impediments persist.

Provision of free legal aid is a guaranteed right for those citizens who are unable to settle the legal aid related costs. This right is applicable to individuals with low or no income, welfare beneficiaries, persons with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, asylum seekers, stateless persons, elderly individuals with no family support, minors involved in legal proceedings and persons in prison or detention.

Free legal aid is divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary legal aid is available to everyone, whereas secondary legal aid is intended for socially vulnerable groups, who are entitled to a pro bono lawyer in any legal case. Applications for free legal aid may be filed either at the regional offices of the Ministry of Justice or at the offices of the licensed organizations that render this service. The application forms are provided free of charge and the procedure is abridged and simplified so to ensure easier access for citizens.

The objective of free legal aid is protection and safeguarding of fundamental human rights and securing access to justice for all regardless of their economic situation or social status.

As for the victims of domestic and gender-based violence, the Law on Free Legal Aid provides for a special procedure, according to which free legal aid may be granted without assessing their financial status—but, nonetheless, only in proceedings for issuing temporary protection measures. These are special civil proceedings in which temporary protection measures are imposed for domestic violence cases, i.e., handled by the non-contentious court in such matters. However, in all other legal cases, and particularly in family-related disputes, regardless of whether the person is a victim or not, provided that there is a need to instigate respective legal proceedings such as divorce, child support claims, property division, division of jointly acquired marital property, custody, etc., then even if the person is a victim of domestic violence, the standard proceeding apply. That means that her financial status will be examined, and free legal aid shall only be granted if the woman meets the financial eligibility criteria, just as it would for any other individual.²⁰

19. Law on Free Legal Aid

20. <https://samoprasaj.mk/prasaj-cat/dali-zrtvite-na-semejno-nasilstvo-moze-da-pobaraat-besplatna-prav-na-pomos-bez-razlika-na-materijalniot-status/>

"I am a mother of three children. We lived in a rental property in an area where we were the only Romani family. The neighbor was always complaining about my children who bothered him. One day, his nephew, who was a police officer, parked his car exactly at the passage where we were supposed to go through. It all ended up in an argument and a fight. The court did not consider the medical reports stating that my husband and I were beaten up. Later on, we discovered that the judge was a relative of theirs. We eventually moved out"

However, according to research conducted by ESE (Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women), "even though the new Law on Free Legal Aid establishes a sufficiently comprehensive legal framework that provides access to information and advice (primary legal aid) and to an attorney (secondary legal aid) for women who have experienced domestic violence, it is still necessary to harmonize it with the legal provisions of the Civil Procedure Law regarding exemption from court costs—commonly known as 'poverty rights.' Furthermore, there is a lack of a well-promoted and effective system for raising legal awareness and informing women about the available legal aid options and exemptions from court fees, which are meant to be used in the court proceedings they are involved in. There is concern regarding the quality of legal aid and legal representation provided under the Law on Free Legal Aid, as the women who have used these services generally express dissatisfaction with the work of the appointed attorneys."²¹

Financial Compensation for Victims of Violent Criminal Acts

The Law on Compensation of Victims of Violent Criminal Acts, adopted in November 2022, became effective six months later.²² Pursuant to Article 9 of this law, "Gender-based violence against women and domestic violence are considered violent criminal acts." In order to exercise the right to financial compensation, the violent criminal act must be reported or recorded either with a police station or with the public prosecutor's office. A person is entitled to compensation regardless of whether the perpetrator is known, and regardless of whether criminal proceedings have been instigated or whether there are factual or legal impediments to instigating such proceedings.

The Commission for Financial Compensation of Victims of Violent Criminal Acts is a newly founded independent legal entity responsible for decision-making on the right to financial compensation and determining the type and amount of compensation for victims of violent criminal acts. It was established pursuant to the Law on Compensation of Victims of Violent Criminal Acts, which aims to provide financial assistance to victims as a form of state assistance, based on the principle of social solidarity and in order to prevent secondary victimization, i.e., additional suffering that victims may be subjected to due to the approach of the competent authorities. In the past period, the Commission has made significant progress, including earning legal legitimacy to operate as an independent body by adopting its Rules of Procedure and establishing the application

21. „The impact of Court Fees and Costs and the Familiarization with the Exemption of Paying Court Fees as an Impediment or an Opportunity to Gain Access to Court Protection of Women who were Subject to Domestic Violence, ESE, page 40

22. Закон за исплата на паричен надоместок на жртви од кривични дела со насилство, Сл. весник на РСМ, бр. 247 од 17.11.2022 година

procedure for financial compensation. This marks an important step toward facilitating access to justice for victims of violent crimes.²³

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

As regards the systematic collection of data related to discrimination disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, age and location, there is still no harmonized and integrated national system that collects, connects and analyzes such data in a coherent and sustainable fashion. The available data from the institutions are often fragmented, outdated, and difficult for the public to access or insufficiently disaggregated to provide for accurate monitoring of gender inequality and structural discrimination. This especially hinders the ability to track the situation of women from vulnerable groups, including Roma women, whose experiences with discrimination and violence often remain invisible due to the absence of ethnically and gender-sensitive data. The absence of such data hinders the planning and implementation of targeted measures and policies, as well as the evaluation of their effectiveness, particularly when it comes to marginalized communities.

4.4 National Mechanism for the Advancement of Women's Status

Despite the formal existence of the Sector for Equal Opportunities within the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (comprising of the Department for Gender Equality; the Department for Prevention and Protection from all Types of Discrimination; the Department for Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence; and the Department for Gender-Responsive Policies and Budgeting) , its institutional and operational autonomy remains restricted. The recommendation of the CEDAW Committee to promote this Sector to ministerial level so that it can effectively function as a national mechanism for the advancement of the status of women has not yet been considered at the political level, thus continuing to limit its capacity with reference to coordination of cross-sectoral gender equality policies.

Despite the ongoing efforts to support the Equal Opportunities Commissions at the local level, financial resources remain limited and unsustainable, which may affect their long-term effectiveness. According to available data, some municipalities have active and operational commissions, whereas in others there is still room for improvement, particularly in terms of adopting local gender equality action plans and securing funding for their implementation.

Moreover, Roma women, especially those belonging to severely marginalized and vulnerable groups, encounter significant challenges and are often excluded from policy-making processes at the local level. This limits their access to resources, services, and opportunities to improve their position in the communities where they reside. Hence, it is crucial to enhance their engagement and representation in local gender equality mechanisms and in public policy development.

23. Commission for Financial Compensation of Victims of Violent Criminal Acts

“Together with the children we went to a pool in a nearby town. We purchased tickets but they didn’t let us go in. When I saw that they let other people go in, I spoke up. The police intervened as well. We shall never go to that pool again.”

In order to improve the situation, it is of pivotal importance to ensure stable and adequate funding for the Equal Opportunities Commissions, to encourage active engagement of Roma women from local communities, as well as to develop specific strategies for inclusion of marginalized women in decision-making processes and in policy implementation at the local level.

The involvement of civil society organizations in public policy-making is still not fully institutionalized. Consultations are predominantly organized through brief public calls for opinions, which curtails the opportunity for more profound dialogue and influence over final decisions. Additionally, there is room for improving the inclusion of organizations working with and for Roma women, women with disabilities and rural women.

4.5 Gender Stereotypes and Harmful Practices

In the Republic of North Macedonia, gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted in education, the media, family life and the public sphere. Even though there are strategies and legal frameworks addressing gender equality, a comprehensive strategy specifically targeted at eradicating gender stereotypes, especially among children and youth, has not yet been adopted.

In the field of education, curricula have not been systematically revised from a gender perspective. Gender awareness is still not fully embedded into teacher training programs and further efforts are required to develop educational content that fosters critical awareness among students about issues related to gender inequality and discrimination.

*“They are expected to integrate but at the same time they cannot send their children clean to school. Their houses are generally clean and their maintenance exceeds the circumstances they live in. But, nonetheless, the conditions that they are forced to live in, lead to the way they are seen and perceived once they come down to the city center. The situation is the same all over Macedonia. Indisputably, this situation leads to occurrence of discrimination. The young seem to be the most affected by it and the mindset of the family makes the children question things. Consequently, the level of self-confidence at school remains low. They are forced to fight against stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, and all of the above-stated impacts their future and their coping mechanisms.” - statement given by a youth activist included in the *Analysis of the Perceptions and Viewpoints of Young Roma as Regards Gender (In)Quality, Discrimination and Antigypsyism of the Roma Women and Youth Association, LULUDI, 2023**

Despite the fact that forced and child marriages are legally prohibited, in practice they remain a grave issue, particularly within certain communities, including the Roma. As of date, competent institutions do not provide a sufficiently coordinated and consistent approach in addressing these phenomena and recordkeeping on their scope remains limited.

While forced marriage is recognized as a form of exploitation under the Criminal Code of North Macedonia, it is prosecuted as human trafficking solely if a monetary transaction

is involved. Other cases are treated as criminal offenses related to sexual abuse or enabling child marriage, depending on the child's age. The absence of statistical data on the implementation of these legal provisions and the ambiguous classification of ongoing cases pinpoint shortcomings in the sphere of legal protection.

The fact that, according to civil society organizations, child and forced marriages are still widely accepted traditions in some Roma communities remains alarming and distressful. These stereotypes heighten the risk for Roma girls of entering exploitative relationships, thus further jeopardizing their access to justice and protection.

Stronger institutional measures are required to prevent forced marriages, raise awareness within communities, and reinforce mechanisms for identification and protection of victims, specifically among Roma women and girls.

As for hate speech addressed to women on social media, there is neither a specific monitoring mechanism nor official data provided by the respective institutions. Female activists, journalists and politicians are frequently targeted with sexist and violent online comments, with no effective protection or sanctions against perpetrators.

4.6 Gender-Based Violence against Women

Albeit the existence of a legal framework and the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (commonly known as the Istanbul Convention), gender-based violence remains a grave and systemic problem in North Macedonia. There is a gap between the regulations and their practical implementation, which jeopardizes the protection of women, and especially those from marginalized communities.

Even though the state provides services such as SOS helplines, shelters and counseling centers, these remain insufficient, disproportionately distributed and underfunded. Shelter centers do not exist in all regions and access to specialized psychological and legal support is limited, especially for Roma women, women with disabilities, migrant women and women from rural areas.

Institutional procedures are often accompanied by secondary victimization, where victims encounter mistrust and are subjected to inadequate treatment and prolonged trauma.

"I had to leave my husband due to psychological abuse from his family— my mother and father-in-law. They took my phone away so I couldn't contact my parents and isolated me from the outside world. Later, I was physically abused by my husband. I lived in constant fear and felt I had no support. That's why I decided to leave and spare myself from the violence - for the sake of my health and well-being and for the safety of my children"

Data collection and analysis pertaining to violence against women remain uncoordinated and unsystematized. Such data are not always publicly available and are rarely disaggregated by type of violence, age, ethnicity, location or relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. This impedes the comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and the accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of any existing protection measures.

4.7 Human Trafficking

The Republic of North Macedonia is a country of origin, transit and destination for human trafficking, particularly involving women and girls. Despite the existence of national strategies and action plans, the identification, protection and reintegration of victims remain restricted and insufficiently effective.

With regard to discrimination against victims of trafficking, discrimination against Roma victims is evident, based on their ethnic background and primarily affecting the identification process. Stereotypes and beliefs persist that child and arranged marriages are part of Roma traditions, and as such, are seen as acceptable and unpunishable.²⁴

As to Macedonian nationals who are victims of trafficking, in 2022, out of seven identified domestic victims, four were Roma and three ethnic Macedonians.²⁵

Even though the state is undertaking efforts to combat human trafficking, Roma women and girls remain hidden victims, subjected to forced begging, early and forced marriages and sexual exploitation. Targeted policies and culturally sensitive programs are required for their proper identification, protection, and support.

In the year 2023, the Criminal Code²⁶ was amended to include the criminal offenses of stalking and sexual harassment. These amendments introduced a fine or imprisonment of up to three years for individuals who engage in stalking. The penalty is more severe if the perpetrator is someone close to the victim, such as a current or former intimate partner or provided that the act is committed against a child, in which case the sentence can reach up to five years of imprisonment. Such amendments make sexual harassment also punishable by up to one year in prison. Should such actions be committed against a subordinate person, someone in a dependency relationship, another person at work or in a public place, or a person who is vulnerable due to age, disease, disability, drug addiction, pregnancy or severe physical or mental impairment, the foreseen penalty is higher, ranging from six months to three years of imprisonment.

4.8 Participation in Public and Political Life

In an effort to advance gender equality in political life, in the year 2001, a quota system was introduced mandating that at least 30% of candidates on electoral lists—at both national and local levels—must be from the less represented gender. Subsequent legislative amendments in 2006 introduced an additional mechanism for gender balance, mandating that every third position on the candidate lists be filled by a representative of the underrepresented gender. These legislative changes significantly heightened the representation of women in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Further amendments to the Electoral Code in 2015 increased the quota to 40%, but, nonetheless, this level of representation was almost fully reached in 2020. In the penultimate parliamentary term (2020–2024), the Assembly included one female

24. Shadow Report as to Chapters 19, 23 and 24 pertaining to trafficking in girls and women, and other related issues for the year 2022, Association for Action against Violence and Human Trafficking – Open Gate – La Strada

25. <https://lastrada.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/lzvestha-vo-senka-makedonski.pdf> ctp.27

26. Law on Amendments and Modifications to the Criminal Code, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, no. 36/2023 dated 17.02.2023

Member of Parliament from the Roma community, who is also a prominent activist and proponent as regards protection and promotion of Roma rights.

Despite the existing legal provisions mandating a 40% gender quota for electoral lists, the actual participation of women in public and political life in North Macedonia remains disproportionate and rather limited, especially with reference to decision-making positions. Even though women have relatively strong representation at the parliamentary level, their participation as mayors and members of municipal councils remains low. In the last election cycle (2021), only two women were elected as mayors.²⁷

A particularly noteworthy challenge is the insufficient political representation of Roma women in both legislative and other branches of government. While the penultimate Assembly composition included one Roma woman MP, the most recent parliamentary composition, elected in June 2024, does not include any representatives from the Roma community among the 120 members of parliament.²⁸ This absence highlights the lack of a Roma voice—especially Roma women—in national decision-making processes. When a particular community lacks representation, its specific needs, challenges and perspectives often remain unrecognized or neglected. Roma women face distinctive challenges that could best be articulated by representatives from their own community. The absence of Roma MPs may result in lesser pressure to enact laws and policies relevant to the Roma population, decreased institutional accountability and fewer opportunities for meaningful engagement in democratic processes.

“A few years ago, I wanted to meet with the mayor to voice my issue. I scheduled an appointment and waited patiently. After a short while, I entered the office, but the mayor—who did not want to deal with Roma people—grabbed me by the arm and escorted me out of his office.”

In addition to this, women from marginalized groups, such as Roma women, women with disabilities, migrant women and women from rural areas, are almost nonexistent in the public and political sphere. Their participation is impeded by systematic barriers, absence of support, socio-cultural stereotypes and financial constraints.

Political parties seldom invest in training programs for women’s leadership, and inner-party mechanisms for democracy and gender equality are poorly developed. Simultaneously, women who are active in public life are increasingly targeted by online violence, hate speech and political discrediting remaining without any adequate institutional protection.

27. Association of Local Self-Government Units

28. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/romi-vlada-parlament-sjeverna-makedonija/33012237.html>

4.9 Access to Personal Documents

Despite the alignment of domestic legislation with the fundamental principles regarding the right to citizenship, in practice there are still administrative constraints that prevent or delay the realization of this right, particularly in the case of women and children from marginalized communities.

Roma women, especially those living in informal settlements, migrant women and women without permanent residence and abode are most commonly affected by statelessness or administrative invisibility. The lack of personal documents (such as birth certificates or identity cards) hinders their access to fundamental rights such as healthcare, education, social services and the right to vote.

Procedures for acquiring nationality, residence status regulation or reacquiring lost citizenship are cumbersome and lengthy, especially for women who lack family support or who have experienced domestic violence.

The system does not sufficiently recognize the specific risks of statelessness for women, such as the loss of citizenship upon divorce, irregular residence status of migrant women or the inability to register the births of their children due to administrative or legal obstacles.

4.10 Education

The right to education for Roma students is enshrined in the Constitution and the laws on education. The Ministry of Education and Science dedicates two separate budgetary supports for each educational level for Roma students—through educational mediators in primary education (Article 37 of the Law), scholarships for Roma students in secondary education (Article 54 of the Law on Student Standards), and scholarships for tertiary education (Law on Student Standards).²⁹

The number of scholarships for Roma students in secondary education increased from 800 in 2019 to 913 in 2020. The dropout rate among scholarship recipients is below 1%. There has been a notable increase in the transition rate of Roma students from secondary to tertiary education ranging from 33.5% in 2021 to 53.9% in 2022. As for the 2022/2023 academic year, 125 scholarships were awarded to Roma university students (50 for first-year students and 75 for students in higher academic years).³⁰

In recent years, the Roma dropout rate from the education system has ranged from 5% to 7%, depending on the academic year. Roma girls account for 60% of those participating in the education system, whereas Roma boys account for 40%. The dropout rate among Roma girls is nearly 24% lower compared to that of Roma boys.³¹

29. Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21*, North Macedonia, A/HRC/WG.6/46/MKD/1 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/46/MKD/1> ctp 6

30. Ibid, page.7

31. Ibid, page.6

“Seven years ago, while I was in elementary school, everyone avoided me because of my dark complexion, and the teachers treated me differently. I wanted to become an athlete, but I was mocked. I constantly felt ashamed and left out. I gave up on sports. I was young and didn’t know something was wrong, but I couldn’t understand what. Now I attend high school where the treatment is different, and I am happy.”

The 2021/2022 school year marked the fourth consecutive year in which, by decision of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Roma children from socially vulnerable households were included in preschool education exempted from co-pay costs. The total number of enrolled Roma children at the national level was 420, of whom 200 came from families at social risk and were exempted from co-pay. In 18 municipalities, 18 mediators were hired to raise parental awareness regarding the importance of education. In 2021, there was a revived increase in the inclusion of Roma children (ages 0–6) in preschool education: 420 children compared to 347 in 2020.³²

In the 2023/2024 school year, the total number of Roma students in elementary education was 9,657, whereas in secondary education it was 1,970, with circa two-thirds as scholarship beneficiaries. In higher education, authorities awarded 135 scholarships to Roma students, while the total number of active Roma students in the education system was 250.³³

The reasons for dropping out of school among girls, especially at the secondary level, include poverty, early and forced marriages, low family expectations and gender stereotypes. Despite the existence of scholarships and supportive measures that have yielded positive results over the years, there is still an evident need for greater investment and support for the genuine needs of girls who are most at risk of exclusion.

The participation of girls and young women in STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) remains limited, partly due to societal expectations and the lack of affirmative measures to empower and support them.

32. Revised Employment and Social Reform Programme, (r)ESRP2022, 2021 Annual Report, page 38

33. <https://nkeu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/posleden-izvestaj-za-zemjata-document-bUd5-24.pdf> crp.87

4.11 Employment

There is a gender disparity in the labor market participation in North Macedonia. The low participation of women in the labor market compared to men remains one of the pivotal challenges, although a decline has been observed in recent years, partly due to a systematic and coordinated approach in implementing policies across various sectors. The employment rate in the case of women (38.4%) is significantly lower than that in the case of men (64.3%). Namely, only 45.5% of working-age women in the country are active, compared to 77.1% of men. The only field where women are in a more favorable position is the unemployment rate, which is 1.9 percentage points lower than that of men. However, this trend has only been recorded in the past few years. Until 2015, the unemployment rate for women was consistently higher than that applicable to men.³⁴

The employment rate among women is significantly lower compared to men, in particular among Roma women, women from rural areas, women with low levels of education and women with disabilities. The informal economy remains the predominant option for many women, depriving them from social protection and labor rights.

In general terms, Roma people have a lower participation rate in the formal labor market compared to the non-Roma population. Only 23% of working-age Roma are formally employed, compared to 44% of the total population, which is nearly half the national average. Among Roma women, the rate of formal employment is only 8%³⁵, indicating profound gender discrepancies and significant barriers to labor market access.

"I work in a pharmacy. My coworkers always look down on me. Whenever Roma people enter the pharmacy, they send them over to me, and then they whisper among them. Sometimes, they even directly insult people. I keep quiet because I depend on this job."

Meanwhile, the Roma community has a significantly high employment rate in the informal economy—around 25% of the population works informally. The most common informal jobs for Roma men include trade, taxi services, construction and agriculture, whereas Roma women are mostly engaged in trade and cleaning services. Roma women are particularly marginalized in the labor market. They are less likely to find work in the formal economy compared to women from non-Roma communities.³⁶

Significantly lower participation rates in qualification and skill development training are evident in the case of young Roma women compared to young Roma men. Nonetheless, a general issue for Roma participation in many skill-building and vocational training programs is the formal educational requirement for enrollment, which usually implies completed primary education.³⁷

Even though the national operational employment plans aim to increase the scope of Roma women in employment measures, these measures do not seem to be sufficiently

34. Revised Employment and Social Reform Programme, (r)ESRP2022, 2021 Annual Report, page.19

35. ECRI Report on North Macedonia (sixth monitoring cycle), 2023: <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-ecri-report-on-north-macedonia/1680ac8c47>, ctp. 23

36. Roma Reproductive Health and Social Wellbeing in the Republic of North Macedonia Enlargement Review 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/hera2023Romahealth>

37. ECRI Report on North Macedonia (sixth monitoring cycle), ECRI Secretariat Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity Council of Europe, 2023 <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-ecri-report-on-north-macedonia/1680ac8c47> ctp.23

tailored to the specific needs of women, which may affect their limited representation in the labor market. In order to make use of most of the measures provided by the Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia (EARNM), individuals need to be registered as unemployed with the Agency. Data show that around 23%³⁸ of Roma are not registered with EARNM, and it is assumed that this is because they are of the opinion that there is no particular benefit from being registered. However, it is important to highlight that in recent years there have been positive developments. Namely, the Roma population has been formally recognized as a distinct target group within the employment measures and institutions have reached a consensus on the necessity of applying a specific approach as to Roma community integration.

According to the 2021 Annual Report on the implementation of the Employment and Social Reform Programme 2020 (ESRP 2020), unemployed Roma were included in the Youth Guarantee in 2021, represented by 971 Roma participants, of whom 492 women.³⁹

The participation of Roma women in the labor market is significantly lower, with pronounced gender disparities in terms of employment outcomes. Limited public transportation and infrastructure in Roma and rural areas, along with safety concerns in public spaces, dwindle their employment opportunities.⁴⁰

The support policies for parents/caregivers are formally aligned with the standards, but in practice, the responsibility for childcare predominantly falls on women, which in turn affects their economic activity. There is a lack of accessible and quality childcare services, especially in rural areas.

In order to reduce the employment disparity between the Roma and the rest of the employed population, and to transition Roma from informal to formal employment, the 2021–2023⁴¹ Government's National Programme for the Transformation of Undeclared Work among Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia foresees staging informative meetings and campaigns within the Roma population, especially among Roma women in order to raise their awareness about the advantages and perks of the preschool system, i.e. free kindergarten for children of Roma ethnicity. This is aimed at encouraging female entrepreneurship among Roma women thus supporting the creation of Roma women-led businesses.

38. Roma Reproductive Health and Social Wellbeing in the Republic of North Macedonia, HERA – Health Education and Research Association, 2023, ctp 7

39. Revised Employment and Social Reform Programme, (r) ESRP2022, 2021 https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/sep/lzvestaj%20za%20implementacija%20za%202021%20na%20Revidirana%20ESRP%202022_M%D0%9A.pdf page 99

40. North Macedonian, Country Gender Assessment, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2024, ctp 45

41. 2021–2023 Government's National Programme for the Transformation of Undeclared Work among Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia, page 14

4.12 Economic Empowerment of Women

In North Macedonia, the economic empowerment of women is not systematically treated as a priority within the framework of economic and social policies, resulting in visible unemployment, low economic activity and limited access to resources for many women, especially those from marginalized groups. Economic marginalization is pronounced, with many Roma women working in the informal economy or encountering challenges to employment due to stigmatization and discrimination.

There is a lack of gender-disaggregated data and analyses on the impact of economic policies on women, particularly due to unpaid care and housework chores, which women disproportionately perform.

In the area of economic empowerment, with the support from the Council of Europe, a National Action Plan for Roma Women in the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 2022–2024 was drawn up. The foreseen measures aim to increase the economic independence of Roma women, enable the acquisition and completion of formal education, ensure protection from any form of gender-based violence, reinforce access to justice and healthcare and enhance participation in public and political life. Nonetheless, when reviewing this plan and the section on allocated funds for its implementation in particular, it becomes apparent that some of the foreseen activities do not entail budgetary implications, whereas the realization of the remaining activities relies on donor funding.⁴²

„I did not finish secondary school. It is very hard to get a job; nobody wants to take me on. I don't know where to look for information and guidance about completing my education.”

Moreover, the 2025 Program of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth encompasses an activity entitled Strengthening the Capacities of Roma Women (30 women) to meet the requirements of the labor market, as well as support for Roma information officers in Roma Resource Centers and Roma caregivers in public kindergartens (30 women). This is in conformity with the Roma Strategy, which stipulates that the funds for this activity shall be provided from the budget of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, with a total allocation of 760,000 denars.⁴³

42. 2022–2024 National Action Plan for the Protection, Promotion, and Fulfillment of the Human Rights of Roma Women and Girls

43. Annual Operational Plan of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth for 2025, page 45

4.13 Health and Healthcare

The right to health, including sexual and reproductive health, is formally guaranteed in North Macedonia, but access to healthcare services is not equal for all women, and is especially limited for those belonging to marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Roma women face greater unmet healthcare needs, partly due to high costs or lack of health insurance. Coverage with prenatal healthcare is lower among Roma women compared to national averages, and postnatal care is also less accessible.⁴⁴

According to the Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women (ESE), Roma mothers and children continue to receive inadequate primary and preventive healthcare services. The infant mortality rate among Roma in 2022 was 3.7 per 1,000 live births, compared to 1.9 among those of Macedonian ethnicity. According to the afore-stated Association, the contributing factors are as follow: 8.3% of pregnant Roma women did not receive antenatal healthcare services; 41% of pregnant Roma women had fewer than eight antenatal checkups, albeit official guidelines prescribe eight to ten mandatory visits.⁴⁵

There has been a noticeable increase in the funds allocated for financing of regular gynecological examinations, laboratory tests during pregnancy and delivery costs for women not covered by mandatory health insurance, which marks an improvement compared to previous years.

Hence, under the Program for Active Protection of Mothers and Children in the Republic of North Macedonia for 2025⁴⁶, provision of free gynecological and laboratory examinations in public health institutions during pregnancy are foreseen, as well as free childbirth for women who have lost their health insurance coverage or who do not possess identification documents. As to these services, the state budget allocates 660,000 MKD annually. In comparison, in the year 2024, the funds allocated for these purposes were in the amount of 370,000 MKD, which indicates that the state recognizes this essence and is willing to support it with increased financial resources.

Considering that the majority of women lacking health insurance or valid personal documents are Roma women, it remains questionable whether this amount is sufficient to meet the needs of this vulnerable group. Additionally, the high costs of childbirth and laboratory tests, especially in the context of an economic crisis and rising inflation, pose a further challenge.

It is also noteworthy that advances have been observed in terms of provision and promotion of access to primary gynecological care for women from this community who reside in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari⁴⁷. As for 2025, 180,000 MKD are to be allocated from the state budget on an annual basis for monthly incentives of 15,000 MKD over a period of 12 months for a selected gynecologist in Shuto Orizari, where the population is predominantly Roma. For years on end, women in this municipality have not had a gynecologist, which further hindered their access to primary gynecological services.

44. North Macedonian, Country Gender Assessment, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2024, page.4,

45. Submission to the UJ Universal Periodic Review 46th Session of the UPR Working Group, 2023, Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women – ESE

46. Program for Active Protection of Mothers and Children in the Republic of North Macedonia for 2025

47. Program for Active Protection of Mothers and Children in the Republic of North Macedonia for 2025

“When I was pregnant, I had problems with the heart. In my seventh month of pregnancy I took a Referral Letter to see an internist. I was with my mum waiting for two hours. Everybody was admitted but me. My mum raised her voice and started arguing with the staff and went to the office of the hospital director. After the director intervened, I was admitted by the internist.”

Under the same Program it is prescribed that in 2025, a total of 150,000 MKD shall be allocated in the individual amounts of 50,000 MKD each to three institutions (University Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic - Skopje, Clinical Hospital Tetovo and General Hospital Kumanovo) for free examinations for women who have been subjected to sexual violence, gender-based violence and domestic violence. This amount has increased compared to 2024, when it amounted to 90,000 MKD. Despite the increase in funds for this specific purpose, the question arises as to whether the allocated amount is adequate, considering the real needs, the high costs of healthcare services and soaring prices.

In the 2023 Annual Report on Program and Budget Implementation of the Program for Active Health Protection of Mothers and Children, no data is provided regarding women as per their ethnic affiliation. Therefore, it cannot be determined how many Roma women have used the services outlined in this Program. It is solely the data referring to the monthly incentive over a period of two (2) years for a designated gynecologist in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari—where the highest percentage of the population is Roma—that are mentioned. The Report showcases information on the type and number of examinations performed⁴⁸. At the time of compiling this report (May 2025), the Annual Report on Program and Budget Implementation of the Program for Active Health Protection of Mothers and Children for 2024 was still not publicly available.

In accordance with the HERA report entitled Reproductive Health and Social Wellbeing of Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia, albeit the budget allocated for medical abortion within the Program for Active Health Protection of Mothers and Children in the Republic of North Macedonia for 2023 was increased from 500,000 MKD to 1,500,000 MKD compared to 2022, hence allowing hospitals other than the one in the capital to use these funds, due to administrative hurdles and cumbersome public procurement procedures, the funds were again awarded to the same hospital in the capital as it was the case before. Even though it was foreseen to have subsequent redistribution of the funds to smaller interested hospitals, the tender proceeding were only completed in September, and medical abortion can only be performed at a single healthcare facility in Skopje.⁴⁹ This situation significantly curtails the access to safe abortion for Roma women residing in rural areas and high financial costs and geographical distance further hinder the realization of their right to healthcare.

This places Roma women from rural areas at a disadvantage, with high costs and distance jeopardizing their right to safe abortion.

Sexual and reproductive health is not systematically addressed in education, and there is insufficient disposable information as to contraception, family planning, prevention

48. 2023 Annual Report on Program and Budget Implementation of the Program for Active Health Protection of Mothers and Children

49. Roma Reproductive Health and Social Wellbeing in the Republic of North Macedonia, HERA – Health Education and Research Association <https://hera.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-eu-enlargement-review-roma-people-n.macedonia.pdf>

of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. Comprehensive sexual education is not part of the school curricula and the available information is often stigmatized and limited.

There are no specific health policies targeted at women's mental health, especially for those exposed to violence, poverty or gender-based discrimination. The healthcare system does not offer comprehensive psychosocial support for women who have sustained violence and the number of trained professionals is insufficient.

4.14 Women in Rural Areas

Women in rural areas in North Macedonia experience multiple forms of discrimination, stemming from gender, geographical, economic and social contributing factors. Even though they account for a significant portion of the female population, their specific needs and rights are seldomly addressed in national policies.

Access to healthcare remains limited, particularly when it comes to gynecological examinations, preventive services and mental health. In many rural areas, there are no gynecologists and healthcare centers are often closed or operate with minimal capacity.

The economic activity of rural women is predominantly within the informal sector, including unpaid labor in family farming, household work and childcare without any social protection or recognized contributions to the pension system. Women are rarely beneficiaries of agricultural subsidies or land owners, which hinders their access to state aid, loans and business opportunities.

As for climate changes and the environment, rural women are commonly exposed to direct consequences, but, nonetheless, they are not involved in the policy creation processes applicable to sustainable management of resources and they do not have access to any training or information pertaining to climate resistance.

4.15 Roma Women

Roma women in North Macedonia often encounter an array of challenges arising from intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and limited participation in social life. Even though they are included in a number of strategies and action plans pertaining to Roma inclusion, their specific needs as women are still insufficiently recognized or fully integrated into any systemic measures.

"I have a white complexion and people cannot tell that I am Romani by my physical appearance. The attitude towards me changes once I say my name."

In the sphere of education, some Roma girls encounter barriers that impact their regular schooling, such as economic hardship, gender expectations, early marriages and insufficient support from the community. Further, continuous, and culturally sensitive programs are required to assist with their retention in the education system.

As to healthcare, Roma women often experience limited access to information and services, alongside various challenges related to documentation, health insurance and communication with healthcare providers. Access to gynecological and preventive healthcare is especially limited in the case of informal and socially vulnerable communities.

As for the labor market, Roma women are most frequently engaged in informal and unstable forms of work without any contracts or social protection whatsoever. Meanwhile, their access to training, qualifications and employment programs remains limited, and in some cases, they are faced with discrimination in the course of the job-seeking process.

Despite the existence of measures for Roma inclusion, they are seldomly developed in consultation with the Roma women themselves and often lack a gender perspective. This leads to their insufficient representation in terms of statistics and foreseen interventions. Moreover, there is a lack of dedicated programs to support and strengthen Roma women's organizations, as well as institutional support for their greater engagement and networking.

4.16 Migrant, Asylum-Seeking and Refugee

Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women in the Republic of North Macedonia experience diverse challenges in accessing rights, services and protection. Even though the legal framework stipulates mechanisms for the protection of individuals under international protection, in practice, the issues regarding equal and gender-sensitive access to services, particularly in cases of sexual and gender-based violence remain unresolved.

In the current system set-up, further efforts are to be put in with regards to specialized procedures for the identification and support of women at risk of violence. Access to healthcare, education, information about their rights and employment can at times be limited, especially in transit centers or shelters, where language barriers, lack of interpreters and limited availability of information create further obstacles.

Furthermore, greater understanding and a systemic response are required as to the specific risks faced by these women, such as the risk of human trafficking, gender-based violence, forced marriage and domestic violence. An additional challenge is the limited availability of sex-disaggregated data and the non-existence of monitoring mechanisms for these aspects in the context of migration.

With regards to family reunification, administrative procedures can oftentimes impose an additional burden, particularly in the case of single mothers, unmarried women or women traveling solo, thus highlighting the need for more flexible and gender-sensitive processes in this area.

5. Municipalities and Mechanisms for Addressing all Forms of Discrimination against Women

The initial Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was adopted in 2006, laying the foundation for the creation of gender-sensitive policies and introducing mechanisms for attaining gender equality. These included the appointment of equal opportunity coordinators in each and every ministry and the establishment of gender equality committees within every municipality. Their role was to introduce the principles of gender equality in the reorganization, advancement, development and evaluation of policy-making processes at all levels and in all phases.

The new Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 6/2012) was enacted in 2012. Pursuant to this law, local self-government units are obligated to address gender equality as an area within their competence and to formulate and implement both general and specific measures aimed at achieving equal opportunities for women and men.

Pursuant to Article 14 of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2012), municipalities are obligated to apply the principle of equal opportunities for women and men in all areas of social life, i.e. political, economic, social, educational, cultural, health, civic and others. Local self-government units are tasked with the incorporation of the principle of equal opportunities in their strategic plans and budgets and with monitoring the effects and impacts of their programs on women and men. In attaining them, and in accordance with Article 14, municipalities are encouraged to draft annual programs outlining measures for promotion of equal opportunities for women and men. As part of their competences and in coordination with various local stakeholders, local authorities can undertake concrete actions so as to promote equality and non-discrimination, mitigate inequalities and build inclusive communities and societies where equality is the norm. Gender inequalities stem largely from prevailing attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes, which are perpetuated within families, education systems, culture, media, workplaces, living environment and the society at large.

In conformity with Article 16 of the Law, it is stipulated that 'the local self-government units, within their scope of competences, are obliged to identify and promote equal opportunities. They are to adhere to the principle of equal opportunities when adopting measures and activities required for their implementation.' Local self-government units are required to found a Commission for Equal Opportunities as a standing body by decision of the municipal council.

The set-up, responsibilities, tasks and obligations of this Commission are outlined in the Statute of the respective local self-government unit. The institutional mechanism at the local level for the promotion of gender equality consists of two key components, namely the Equal Opportunities Coordinator, who is a member of the municipal administration, and the Commission for Equal Opportunities, which is an independent body within the framework of the municipal council.

Additionally, Article 18 of the Law on Equal Opportunities stipulates collection and presentation of sex-disaggregated data. Namely, 'the Parliament, the Government, state administrative bodies, judicial authorities and other state bodies, **local self-government units**, legal entities entrusted with the performance of public interest activities, associations, foundations, public enterprises, educational institutions, institutions in the field of social protection, health institutions, political parties, media, trade companies and other entities are legally obligated to **collect, record and process statistical data**, and are required to showcase such data disaggregated by sex and to submit them to the State Statistical Office.'

This legal requirement ensures that institutions maintain gender-sensitive records and that policies and programs can be monitored and evaluated with respect to gender impact.

Law on Protection and Prevention against Discrimination⁵⁰

The Law on Protection and Prevention against Discrimination regulates the prevention and prohibition of discrimination, the forms and types of discrimination, the protection related procedures, as well as the set-up and operation of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. The law ensures equal protection and a dignified life for all citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, including the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. The law was adopted on October 27th 2020.

The Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination⁵¹ e (CPPD) is **an independent and autonomous body** that operates in compliance with its legal competencies, as set out in the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.

A discrimination complaint ⁵² may be filed to the Commission in multiple ways: electronically (online), by mail or in person at the premises of the Commission.

This legal framework is designed to render accessible, inclusive and efficient mechanisms for individuals experiencing discrimination as well as to ensure accountability in both public and private sectors.

50. Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (mtsp.gov.mk)

51. About CPPD

52. Procedure for Discrimination Reporting - CPPD

6. The Situation within the Municipalities with Reference to the Implementation of CEWAD Recommendations

6.1 Municipality of Sveti Nikole

Institutional set-up of the system for equal opportunities at the local level

In terms of equality and anti-discrimination protection mechanisms, the Municipality of Sveti Nikole has appointed a Gender Equality Coordinator and a Municipal Commission on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men pursuant to the provisions of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Nevertheless, the municipal documents, such as the Statute and various programs, do not explicitly define discrimination against women on the basis of ethnic origin or nationality, including Roma women. Still, the municipality has undertaken steps toward improving gender equality between men and women.

The principle of gender equality is embedded in the local policies of the Municipality of Sveti Nikole. This principle is formally integrated through the **Annual Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men**, which is adopted by the Municipal Council on an annual basis. In addition to the Municipal Budget Programs, this principle of equality is also embedded into certain strategic documents, such as: the 2024-2027 Social Plan of the Municipality of Sveti Nikole, the Integrated Development Plan of the Municipality of Sveti Nikole and the Local Economic Development Strategy of the Municipality of Sveti Nikole. Nonetheless, **no updated strategic documents currently exist** that specifically dwell on promoting the status of Roma women or supporting their active participation in public and political life. The last local Roma strategy, i.e., the Local Action Plan for Roma, covered the period from 2013 to 2015. Limited attention is partially attributed to the small number of Roma living in the municipality, some of whom self-identify as Turks.

The municipality undertakes measures for sensitization and empowerment of the population with reference to equality and equal rights between men and women, and the genuine realization of those rights across all aspects of life through the Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. This Program envisages activities such as: educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns to promote the importance of equality, support for local initiatives targeted at inclusion of women in social and economic life, collaboration with civil society organizations to promote women's rights, workshops and forums involving both women and men from various sectors of life as well as promotion of non-violent communication and violence prevention.

Despite the afore-stated, no formal affirmative measures currently exist in the Municipality of Sveti Nikole, such as gender quotas or specific policies aimed at accelerating de facto gender equality, particularly with reference to Roma women. Albeit the absence of direct measures, the municipality holds the belief that the existing initiatives and activities contribute indirectly to this specific goal. For example, they support civil society organizations and their projects and they also actively involve women from diverse communities in public events, training sessions, and advisory bodies. These efforts aim to increase visibility and participation of women in public life.

The Municipality of Sveti Nikole lacks a formal mechanism as regards systematical collection of data pertaining to the specific issues encountered by Roma women. Nevertheless, relevant information often reaches the municipality through civil society organizations working directly with the Roma community, informal meetings or citizen consultation days with the Mayor, where residents—including Roma women can express and voice their views and needs. Even though according to the latest census, the Roma population in the municipality is relatively small, the Municipality of Sveti Nikole remains open and accessible to all residents alike.

As a local self-government unit, the Municipality of Sveti Nikole does not have a formalized mechanism for monitoring attitudes and perceptions related to the education of girls and women, including Roma girls. For the time being, the municipality does not provide any specific support for Roma girls interested in pursuing sports. Yet, it remains open to supporting all girls and youth from all ethnic communities to engage in sports activities through various programs and initiatives. This support is made available through the Program for Awarding Talented Students and a public call for proposals for allocation of municipal budget funds for financing program activities of civic associations, foundations, sports clubs and other forms of association in the field of sports.

With reference to voting rights, the Municipality of Sveti Nikole does not have a formal practice or specific jurisdiction to address discrimination or pressure exerted on women, including Roma women, during elections.

For the time being, the Municipality of Sveti Nikole **does not have a formal program addressing the prevention of child marriages**, but, nonetheless, it has been proposed that a campaign for the prevention of child marriage be **organized through the Municipal Council for Social Protection**, in cooperation with primary school principals.

The Municipality of Sveti Nikole does not have specialized programs for girls and women who have dropped out of school prematurely, but, nonetheless, opportunities for labor market inclusion are provided through the Public Works Program. In the absence of a specific act or policy regulating these programs, this group of women is indirectly support through such as the afore-stated Public Works Program.

Focus Group Findings – Opinions and Attitudes of Roma Women

Despite the efforts on the part of the local self-government, Roma women in the Municipality of Sveti Nikole continue to encounter various challenges in their everyday lives. Findings from focus group discussions with Roma women disclose that they have not been invited by the municipality to participate in public debates nor to review strategic documents of any institution with the exception of attending events organized by civil society organizations. Moreover, they stated that there was no representative from the

Roma community to advocate for the interests of Roma women at the local level. Roma women also reported facing a myriad of injustices, such as instances where Macedonian women falsely identify themselves as Roma in order to yield benefits from scholarships, employment opportunities, university admissions, etc., even though they are not Roma.

In general, Roma women do not feel discriminated against in public spaces such as stores, markets or parks. Yet, some participants in the focus groups shared negative experiences with the behavior of the staff in certain institutions, which, according to them, restricted the ability of Roma girls and women to realize their full potential. One young woman shared her negative experience from primary school, where she felt discriminated against both by her teachers and classmates due to her dark complexion. Subsequently, this resulted in suppressing her desire to participate in sports. Later on, during high school, she no longer felt discriminated against, attributing this to the greater influence that teachers and parents have on shaping children's perceptions at a younger age.

Regarding employment, women employed in the private sector expressed satisfaction with their colleagues' attitudes, their working conditions and the salaries they receive.

The women participating in the focus groups strongly condemned child marriages and emphasized that they wanted their daughters to pursue their education and become economically independent. In this context, they acknowledged the need to raise awareness both within the Roma community and in the broader society alike. This can be attained by highlighting positive examples of Roma women who are entrepreneurs, who have completed their education, who are employed and who are financially independent.

As for voting rights, the focus group participants stated that they voted autonomously and that they made their own decisions who to vote for.

Conclusion: Despite the relatively well-established institutional mechanisms for equal opportunities, it is still essential to introduce mechanisms for detecting the challenges faced by Roma women at the local level and to adequately address these challenges in the municipal programs. Intensive efforts should be channeled towards running campaigns against child marriages, especially in primary schools and among the Romani population. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can assist in discerning such challenges and discriminatory practices, in organizing women and testing models for participation and overcoming institutional barriers to the realization of Roma women's rights. There is of paramount importance to work jointly on the Roma Strategy which was previously developed by the municipality. This Strategy is to be reviewed and revised with new additions. Namely, it is to be updated into a new strategic document, demonstrating a pledge to working with Roma women and girls in the municipality of Sveti Nikole.

6.2 Municipality of Bitola

Institutional set-up of the equal opportunities system at the local level

The Municipality of Bitola, through various programs and local initiatives, is aware of its obligations regarding the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The programs aimed at improving the status of women are aligned with the European and national standards on human rights and gender equality. The Municipality of Bitola, through several strategic documents, including the Local Action Plan for Gender Equality, defines discrimination and is committed to preventing discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin, including against Roma women. Programs for Roma integration include women in all spheres of social participation. The principle of equality between men and women is enshrined in the Local Strategy for Gender Equality and the Action Plan for Roma Inclusion, which outline targeted at promoting the status of Roma women.

As far as Roma women are concerned, specific programs focusing on their access to education, healthcare and employment are being implemented. RAMACTED and Roma Education Centers are just some of the specific support models. The Municipality of Bitola has introduced program measures that foresee quotas for women, including Roma women, in different areas, such as in public administration and elected positions. Currently, there are no Roma women employed in the municipal administration, but, anyhow, two Roma women are part of the municipal councils, one in the Council for Social Protection and the other one in the Youth Council.

In terms of regulation, the Municipality of Bitola has established an intersectoral group for the advancement and promotion of equal opportunities and pays due attention to creating a gender-sensitive budget. This showcases the existence of policies that are in favor of programs focused on girls and women. Further information about the municipality's priority programs and projects is available on their official website.

The Municipality of Bitola allocates funds through its gender equality and Roma integration programs dedicated at organizing training, social programs and stimulation of economic activity for Roma women. As for 2025, the Municipality of Bitola intends to continue funding projects for gender equality and Roma inclusion, including Roma women. These programs shall be financed through local economic development and inclusion programs.

The Municipality of Bitola stays up-to-date with the **specific issues faced by Roma women** through cooperation with organizations such as Sumnal¹ and "Romaked", which work in the field of Roma rights. In the past three years, cases of discrimination have been reported and the local authorities have undertaken adequate steps to look into and address these cases. Free legal services are provided via the municipal social services center and NGOs, which render assistance to Roma women, especially in cases of discrimination and violence.

Roma women are infrequently involved in decision-making processes at the local level. Nonetheless, the Municipality of Bitola is working on improving their participation through involvement in public consultations and through community engagement programs. In the available sources there is no specific information with reference to

concrete measures undertaken by the municipality to mitigate discrimination or pressure on women during elections, especially Roma women.

In the Municipality of Bitola, as in many other rural areas, women, and Roma women in particular, are faced with specific issues related to their economic status, access to education, healthcare and gender equality. Some of the issues detected by organizations operating in Roma communities, include the following: low level of education, discrimination, limited access to healthcare services and absence of economic opportunities, which further diminishes the already grave social and economic context.

The municipality is undertaking continuous steps to address the barriers experienced by Roma people in education. Only a small percentage of Roma, especially girls and women, are enrolled in secondary and tertiary education. This pinpoints the existence of stereotypes and prejudices that influence expectations regarding educational outcomes, completion of higher levels of education and the choice of professional occupations among Roma girls. There is also limited support within the family and community for pursuing education.

In the Municipality of Bitola, diverse programs are being implemented to support and include girls and women who have dropped out of school prematurely. One significant initiative is the project entitled Young Women and Girls Engaged in the Community, implemented by the Association for the Development of the Roma Community "Sumnal" during the period between January and April 2024. The scope of the project was to equip disadvantaged young women and girls from the Municipality of Bitola and the Pelagonija region with theoretical knowledge that would help them understand the system better and use democratic tools more effectively thus reinforcing their political maturity and enabling them to become active citizens in society and their communities EPALE - European Commission

Additionally, in cooperation with UN Women and CEED, the Municipality of Bitola organized trainings for economic empowerment of women. These trainings encompassed development of employment skills, entrepreneurial and managerial skills, digital marketing, as well as development of business ideas and business plans. This initiative aims to support women in their economic development and integration into society. In order to access these programs, interested girls and women are to contact the project organizers or the municipal services competent for social protection and gender equality.

In the Municipality of Bitola, the prevention of child marriages is realized in cooperation among the municipality, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations. One of the more prominent initiatives is the project entitled NO to Child Marriages, implemented by the Association for Development of the Roma Community "Sumnal". On November 29th 2024, a workshop was held at the Secondary School Taki Daskalo in Bitola, aimed at raising awareness about the repercussions of child marriages and promoting preventive measures through education and support. EPALE - European Commission. The Association for Development of the Roma Community "Sumnal", together with the Department for Prevention in Bitola, within the framework of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, has conducted several lectures for students and parents on this very topic.

As part of the strategy for development of volunteering in the Municipality of Bitola, the Youth Cultural Center (MKC) Bitola, in collaboration with the municipality and the Local Volunteer Council, is working on devising a new strategy for the period 2023–2026. This strategy foresees engagement of young people in volunteer activities, which can subsequently contribute to the prevention of child marriages. This objective may only be attained through education and increased awareness (mladieu.mk)

Additionally, the Municipality of Bitola and the National Network against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence entered into a Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment of a Regional Advisory Center that would render support and assistance to women and children victims of gender-based and domestic violence. This center intends to provide support and resources to victims, which may result in reducing child marriages by raising awareness and providing the necessary assistance. ([линк до повеќе информации](#))

The afore-stated activities and programs are just a segment of the endeavors on the part of the local community to cope with the issue of child marriages. Such endeavors presuppose education, support and engagement of all interested parties.

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

In spite of the good institutional setup of the mechanisms for protection against discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities at the local level, and in spite of the municipality's endeavors to implement measures and activities for the inclusion of Roma women and enhancement of their status, all the women participating in the focus group reaffirmed that they had experienced discrimination and disrespect at some point in their lives—most commonly when accessing healthcare services, obtaining documents, visiting the market and even when applying for jobs. These cases remain unreported. The reasons are multiple, such as:

- ▶ fear of being further stigmatized,
- ▶ lack of trust in institutions,
- ▶ insufficient information as to where and how to report such instances,
- ▶ and lack of legal support.

The women are of the opinion that the municipality provides support to Roma via various programs and initiatives, but, yet, there is a need for that support to be more intensive and specifically targeted at Roma women. This was also reaffirmed by the fact that only one woman from the focus group has good communication with the local government and actively advocates for issues relevant for Roma women. This highlights the need for greater involvement of women in decision-making processes.

Oftentimes, Roma women face humiliating and derogatory comments in public. Their experiences include verbal insults and disrespect in shops, markets and on the streets. This creates a feeling of rejection and exclusion from public life, which in turn adversely affects their access to the labor market, healthcare and advancement opportunities.

As for employment, focus group participants put forward some serious obstacles to formal employment due to discrimination based on age and ethnicity, as well as a lack of awareness of the existing mechanisms for protection of workers' rights. Access to healthcare is also hindered by discrimination in healthcare institutions. One participant

shared an instance of being insulted and belittled during childbirth and stated that her family had to seek help from a local religious leader (mufti) to intervene at the hospital.

In everyday life, Roma women feel that they do not enjoy the same rights as men. Some of them stated that their situation improved after the passing of their father-in-law or mother-in-law as they then became more competent in decision-making. There is a noticeable influence of the “new times,” which bring positive changes, especially among the younger generations. Nonetheless, despite having access to the Internet and despite being able to follow modern developments, the practice of early marriage still prevails within the community, with girls getting married prior to completing secondary education. This seriously curtails their personal and educational freedom and impedes their development.

All participants stated that they can express and voice their opinions within the family and community, which they attribute to modernization and raised awareness brought through media and the Internet. They are of the opinion that they can initiate changes within their community, particularly on the topic of women’s entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, they need training, financial support and education on how to set up their own business, especially since they do not own any property in their name. Additionally, they are in need of training and programs on leadership and political engagement, which they reckon would contribute to greater involvement of women in local processes and to addressing issues related to access to basic rights in their community (such as access to water and infrastructure), as well as raising awareness within the local community about their rights and potential opportunities.

Conclusion: This Report discerns and portrays the complex and challenging everyday life of Roma women, who occasionally face discrimination, inequality, gender-based violence and limited opportunities for personal and professional development. Despite the existence of signs of minor positive changes, they are insufficient for any substantial improvement to their status. The Municipality of Bitola continuously cooperates with non-governmental organizations and works on including Roma women in local processes and specifically addressing the identified issues that they face. However, it is noticeable that a vast segment of the activities are implemented with the support of projects and donations, given the municipality’s limited resources.

With appropriate policies, programs and support, Roma women can become active doers in improving their own position and in the development of their community. Concrete steps are needed to:

- ▶ Increase awareness about women’s rights
- ▶ Ensure access to psychological, legal and institutional support
- ▶ Actively involve women in political and social life
- ▶ Support educational and economic initiatives
- ▶ Involve men in the process of changing cultural and social norms

The Municipality of Bitola can serve as a good model of proactive local government that seeks solutions through cooperation with various organizations and institutions. It is also essential to work with the local population and jointly with non-governmental organizations focus on raising awareness among Roma women about their rights and freedoms, as well as by presenting good practices for women’s inclusion and empowerment.

6.2 Municipality of Berovo

Institutional set-up of the equal opportunities system at the local level

The Municipality of Berovo is aware of its respective obligations regarding the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, but, nonetheless, lacks the capacity to fulfill all those obligations. The municipality has attempted to develop local services for the protection of women against gender-based violence through project applications, but has not yet secured funding to this end.

Issues related to discrimination are tackled in several documents, such as the Local Action Plan for Roma, the Action Plan for Mitigating the COVID-19 Consequences, the Program for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women, the Strategy and Action Plan for Equal Opportunities as well as the 2024-2027 Strategy for Local Economic Development. The municipality closely monitors the needs of women at the local level and undertakes appropriate measures to ensure full development and advancement of women, aiming to safeguard the realization and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all spheres, particularly in the political, social, economic and cultural arena.

In terms of affirmative measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women, there are no quotas for Roma women and the municipal administration does not employ any Roma women. There are no Roma women in the Municipal Council either and the municipality does not have accurate data on the number and participation of Roma women in other governing bodies.

In order to obtain information about the specific issues faced by Roma women, the municipality has established an Institutional Working Group and a Local Action Group, which include Roma participants who voice and relay their needs. It is common practice for Roma women to be invited and to participate in the perusal of local programs and proposals, such as in the area of urban planning. They are always invited to meetings and fora through public calls and also partake in Community Fora and in the development of strategic documents.

Municipal employees have attended numerous trainings on issues related to discrimination and equal opportunities, particularly regarding the advancement of the status of Roma women and their position within the community. By means of projects and cooperation with non-governmental organizations, the municipality renders various types of support. For instance, a program aimed at supporting and improving housing conditions for Roma through which several Roma families have had their homes renovated and living conditions improved is in its final phase.

The municipality has undertaken measures to raise awareness and promote the empowerment of the population regarding equality and equal rights for men and women for the purpose of ensuring genuine realization of equal rights in all walks of life. Some instances refer to IPARD trainings on the use of funds by female farmers, initiatives for women's healthcare in the area of reproductive health and even certain public works projects such as arranging public spaces, building sidewalks (to improve student safety) and lighting key streets to increase the safety of women and girls.

In terms of employment assistance, Roma women have been included through the Community Work Program, whereby they had the opportunity to undergo upskilling and earn certificates for working with elderly people and people with disabilities, thus making them more competitive on the labor market.

Despite the fact that the municipality has not received any reports or direct information about the existence of stereotypes and prejudices concerning the education of girls and women, particularly Roma girls, they acknowledge that such stereotypes still exist. To address this, programs and measures such as mentorship and support through schools have been developed. The municipality has not devised any specific programs for inclusion of Roma children in sports activities. However, as a municipality that does not support stereotypes or discrimination, it encourages all children to participate in sports activities regardless of their ethnicity.

The municipality does not provide dedicated pro bono legal services for Roma women, but they do have access to such services through the Regional Department of the Ministry of Justice.

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

In recent years, the local self-government has played a pivotal role in supporting the Roma community. It has organized trainings, has involved them in municipal activities and planning, and there is satisfaction in terms of the provided direct support by the municipality in addressing pressing issues such as housing.

Active participation in the municipality is evident through the engagement of women in the drafting of local projects, invitations to and participation in community fora for project selection and budgeting. They feel that their problems and needs are acknowledged and that they are heard and recognized.

In terms of education and access to healthcare services, they do not feel discriminated against. The Roma women who participated in the focus group stated that they had never been victims or witnesses of any unpleasant situations such as discrimination by institutional officials, medical personnel or within formal and informal groups.

They have substantial information available regarding access to rights and have attended ample training on this subject matter. They are familiar with affirmative measures in the segment of education, including scholarships and how to access them. Young Roma girls are actively involved in education, and some of them are scholarship beneficiaries. They are ambitious as regards pursuing their education and feel motivated to compete with their peers in terms of achievements.

As for child marriages, they do not perceive them as a cultural thing or as imposed decisions by adults. They regard them as a personal choice, but personally would not support them, being of the belief that such marriages are not in the interest of the partners or of the children in that community, as they hinder personal growth and development opportunities.

Senior Roma women face obstacles in the labor market and in choosing the profession they want to pursue. They believe that there are barriers both in selecting occupations and in meeting the requirements. Although they have not experienced any direct or indirect discrimination, they remain convinced that it still exists.

Adults have their own bank accounts and are listed as recipients of financial transfers. Possessing personal phones and available benefits allows them to have access to the Internet and to important information.

Roma women in the Municipality of Berovo feel equal to men. They have had the opportunity to freely voice their opinions in elections and have not been victims of electoral manipulation. They have not experienced any restrictions as of yet and believe that their rights will continue to be guaranteed in the future.

Conclusion: The Municipality of Berovo is continuously working on improving the position and status of Roma women in the municipality. Given the limited budget, the municipal administration is gaining knowledge and skills to identify any such issues and in cooperation with NGOs and Roma women, address them through project implementation. It is essential to initiate programs for non-discrimination and combating violence at the local level, starting from an early school age. Roma women are aware of their rights and opportunities for advancement and actively participate in surpassing barriers and attaining full inclusion in society. This is also reflected in the differing perspectives of older and younger generations of Roma women.

6.3 Municipality of Gostivar

Institutional set-up of the equal opportunities system at the local level

In the Municipality of Gostivar, some of the administrative servants working on issues related to discrimination, equal opportunities and inclusion, have attended trainings on the topic of protection and prevention from discrimination, and hence they are familiarized with the obligations stemming from the Convention and are aware of its relevance. They work on combating all forms of discrimination within the scope of their competences. Some of the administrative servants have heard of the existence of the Convention, but, nonetheless, they are not familiarized with either the contents or the obligations on the part of the local self-government as regards its implementation at the local level.

A general ban on discrimination, without specifying the grounds for discrimination, is mentioned in the municipal acts and documents such as the Statute, strategies and some programs (like the Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men). Affirmative measures aimed at establishing equality between men and women, in terms of quotas or other activities, are non-existent. The prevailing opinion is that this is within the competences of political parties, which are to affirm and implement general policies and legal measures for the representation of women in politics, i.e. representation of women on the lists of councilors and members of parliament. The group noted that in the Municipal Council of Gostivar, out of a total of 30 councilors, 11 to 12 members of staff are women, but, nonetheless, there is not a single Roma woman. In terms of general data on employed women in the municipal administration of Gostivar, three Roma women are permanently employed on a full-time basis, one of whom is a counselor in the Human Resources Department, whereas the other two hold cleaning positions. Several other women are engaged under service contracts.

Opinions and information are divided as to whether the local self-government invites Roma women to participate in the development of local policies and plans. The municipality considers that this is to the discretion of the policy and program creators, but the practice indicates that Roma women do not attend the events albeit invited.

The situation regarding the empowerment of Roma women has improved as a result of activities undertaken in conformity with the Strategy for Roma and local action plans from 2018–2020 and 2022–2023.

In the Municipality of Gostivar, there are active social measures for the development and improvement of the position of women and child protection, as an essential segment of the household. In this respect, in the year 2024, 100 vouchers were distributed to women, of whom 50% were for Albanian women, 30% for Macedonian women and 20% for Roma women. The municipality also provides one-off financial aid to families at social risk, including Roma families (ranging from 3,000 to 9,000 MKD).

In the Municipality of Gostivar, in the 2023 there was an ongoing program and a call for completing secondary education for Roma as an opportunity for their inclusion in the labor market. Within the educational institutions from grades 1 to 9, there are no tailored programs targeting greater inclusion of Roma children, in particular girls, in extracurricular activities such as sports.

Child marriages are not a commonplace occurrence in the city of Gostivar, and therefore the municipality does not undertake any activities for the prevention of child marriages.

So far, the Municipality of Gostivar has not received any complaints filed by Roma women as to occurrence of discrimination or to infringement of one's voting right. Within the municipal building, there is also an office for pro bono legal aid operating under the Ministry of Justice.

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

Roma women in Gostivar believe that they are discriminated against and often harassed on various grounds and by entities such as healthcare providers as well as during procedures for obtaining documentation from institutions like the Center for Social Work and the law enforcement. According to these women, the greatest barriers relate to access to healthcare and the treatment they receive from personnel responsible for document issuance in hospitals.

They have never received an invitation from the municipality to attend any public debate, forum or training, and feel that their human rights are not recognized by the local government. Roma women in the Municipality of Gostivar lack information in various areas, which causes problems in different situations and with certain institutions. Some participants have attended leadership training organized by non-governmental organizations.

All women share the opinion that they do not enjoy the same rights as men, but they consider it “normal” that they have fewer rights simply because they are women. None of the women in the focus group own property in their name, but they do have personal phones. They are free to express and voice their opinions but cannot always move freely or go out whenever they want, unlike men. They believe they are not sufficiently empowered to instigate changes in public awareness, cultural practices or to promote Roma women's entrepreneurship.

Some respondents stated that during elections, their husbands would tell them how and who to vote for.

Conclusion: The Municipality of Gostivar has implemented measures for the empowerment of Roma women in line with Local Action Plans for Roma Integration. However, systematic efforts are needed to identify the real problems Roma women face, as well as cooperation with all institutions at the local level and raising public awareness about discrimination protection mechanisms.

6.4 Municipality of Shuto Orizari

Institutional set-up of the equal opportunities system at the local level

In the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, there is no awareness regarding the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) at the local level or of the obligations stemming from it. The Municipality of Shuto Orizari always adheres to the principle of equality between men and women in local politics, as stated in the Program for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men. The documents do not prescribe what discrimination against women based on ethnic origin or nationality constitutes. There is no information on who the Equal Opportunities Coordinator is and this piece of information is not published on the municipality's website.

The municipality undertakes adequate measures for the full development and advancement of women with the ultimate goal of realizing and enjoying human rights and fundamental freedoms in all areas, especially in political, social, economic and cultural spheres by means of raising awareness among women with regards to human rights, activities for the prevention and recognition of gender-based discrimination, upholding moral values, motivating women to set up their own businesses, promoting creative values, and more.

Despite the absence of specifically prescribed strategic documents for improving the status of Roma women and their participation in public and political life, the municipality considers that it undertakes measures for the sensitization and emancipation of the population in terms of equality in all spheres of life. Roma women working as councilors in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari partake in reviewing local programs and urban planning proposals. Namely, three Roma women are employed in the municipal administration and hold the positions of as an archivist, a technical secretary and a clerk. Five Roma women are members of the Municipal Council of Shuto Orizari, and there is also a Roma woman serving as deputy principal in a primary school.

The municipality has not received any reports of discrimination cases, although the topic is discussed during workshops organized by the municipality. No complaints have been submitted to the municipality about women being pressured during elections.

Regarding the prevention of child marriages, the municipality conducts activities in cooperation with schools and non-governmental organizations.

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

Women from the Municipality of Shuto Orizari report various instances in which they have experienced discrimination, both in everyday life and from the institutions. Despite a general downward trend in discriminatory practices in public places such as cafés, they still do not always feel comfortable sitting in such places due to mocking or judgmental attitudes by the others. As regards institutions, they feel discriminated against due to their insufficient command of the Macedonian language when interacting with front-desk workers or when exercising their right to healthcare where they are left waiting or not given test results on time.

Women are aware that they have the same guaranteed rights as men, but, nevertheless, this does not always mean that women's rights are duly protected. They believe that their basic human rights are acknowledged by the local self-government (Municipality of Shuto Orizari), which organizes activities aimed at detecting problems to be included in the municipality's programs with the support of non-governmental institutions.

As for the problems that Roma women in the municipality experience, they put forward violence, pressure exerted by men, excessive workloads, lack of voice, discrimination, illiteracy, issues with personal documents, insufficient provision of healthcare services and unemployment and other pressures as well.

The women stated that they made their own decisions who to vote for and believed that more women could be encouraged to engage in women's entrepreneurship should there be training and workshop opportunities.

Conclusion: The programs of the Municipality of Shuto Orizari are targeted at the emancipation and empowerment of Roma people, including women. The municipality cooperates with non-governmental organizations in identifying the problems that women face and finding ways to address them. Women in the municipality believe that further efforts are required to overcome discrimination by administrative staff in institutions and that there should be projects for economic empowerment of Roma women.

6.5 City of Skopje

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

Roma women participating in the focus groups do not sufficiently recognize discrimination. All of them have experienced some form of discrimination in an institution (mainly in social or healthcare institutions), but they did not identify it as discrimination but they simply accepted it as normal behavior on the part of the institutional personnel. Some of the women are employed, but do not have a bank account and receive their salary in cash (i.e., they work informally). Only those who are welfare beneficiaries have bank accounts.

Roma women do not receive support from the municipality and they do not know why that is. Whenever they go to the municipality to report a problem or ask for help, they are turned down and are even denied entry to the municipal building.

The participating women believe that at present they have slightly more rights compared to the past. They are able to express their opinions freely, though not always. Old-fashioned traditions and beliefs still prevail in the community preventing them from always speaking their minds. However, all participants were generally adamant about always expressing their opinions or positions on a given subject matter. They vote independently during elections, but also pointed out that there were numerous attempts by political parties to influence their vote.

None of the participants own property in their name. However, they regard this common practice attributing it to the fact that no Roma people own property in their name, that all homes are informal and legalized, and therefore, parents cannot bequeath property to their children.

The focus group participants stated that women in their municipalities faced other problems as well, among which inadequate living conditions, flooding and lack of market space to sell their goods and being asked to pay for a spot to sell at the market. Regarding child marriages, they declared that in the past there were many more cases of girls getting married before finishing school, but now their number has diminished. One participant said that she got married at 15 and gave birth to her first child at 16, but she claimed it was her own decision and she was not coerced into marriage.

The women believe that they could be drivers of a change, but that it would be less feasible, mainly because attitudes, beliefs and convictions are hard to change, and that in the Roma community people generally are not in favor of changes.

Наоди од фокус групи- мислења и ставови на жените Ромки

Жените Ромки, учеснички на фокус групите, не ја препознаваат доволно дискриминацијата. Сите се соочиле со некаква дискриминација во некоја институција (главно во социјално или во здравствена установа), но не ја препознале дискриминацијата, туку едноставно го прифатиле тоа како нормално однесување на лицата вработени во институциите. Дел од жените работат, но немаат сметка во банка и платата ја земаат во плик односно работат непријавено. Сметка во банка имаат само оние кои се приматели на социјална помош.

Жените Ромки немаат поддршка од општината, но не знаат зошто е тоа така. Кога и да одат до општината да пријават проблем или да побараат помош, ги враќаат назад и не им дозволуваат дури ни пристап во општината.

Жените сметаат дека сега имаат малку повеќе права во однос на порано. Тие можат слободно да си го искажат своето мислење, но не секогаш. Старите традиции и верувања се уште се присутни во заедницата и затоа не можат секогаш да кажат што мислат. Но, сите беа главно одлучни дека секогаш би го кажале своето мислење или став за некоја работа. На избори гласаат сами по свое убедување, но посочија и дека има многу обиди за влијанија од политичките партии, кои се обидуваат да влијаат врз нив за кого да гласаат.

Ниту една од учесничките нема имот на свое име. Но тие тоа го нормализираат со наративот дека никој од Ромите нема имот на свое име, сите имаат диви грабди, нелегалizирани, па според тоа, родителите не можат да им остават имот на своите деца.

Учесничките на фокус групата изјавија дека постојат други проблеми со кои се соочуваат жените во нивните општини, но во смисла на несоодветни услови за живот, поплави, немање место на пазарот за да продаваат производи, им се бара да плаќаат за продажно место на пазарот, и слично. Во однос на малолетничките бракови, велат дека порано имало многу случаи на девојчиња кои стапуваа во брак пред да завршат училиште, но сега и нема толку многу такви случаи. Една од учесничките изјави дека самата таа се омажила на 15 години, а првото дете го родила на 16 години, но рече дека самата сакала, не била присилно омажена.

Жените сметаат дека можат да поттикнат иницијатива за промена, но дека тоа тешко може да се реализира, најмногу заради тоа што ставовите и верувањата и убедувањата тешко можат да се променат, и дека главно во ромската заедница луѓето не сакаат да се менуваат.

Conclusion: Despite the responsibilities that the City of Skopje holds pertaining to eradicating all forms of discrimination against women, the City of Skopje does not undertake any actions to instigate mechanisms for identifying women's problems or resolving them in conformity with the City's mandate. There are no activities in place for sensitizing or training employees and the local population. Due to low levels of education and their social status, Roma women accept discriminatory practices as normal.

6.6 Municipality of Shtip

Institutional set-up of the equal opportunities system at the local level

The Municipality of Shtip has adopted the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life and is familiar with all the obligations arising from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Additionally, the municipality abides by national legislation, including the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified by the Republic of North Macedonia and is now part of the work of the municipal administration, meaning that they implement the legal provisions of this Convention in practice.

The principle of equality is embedded in the Annual Equal Opportunities Program, in the 2021-2025 Municipal Gender Equality Strategy of Shtip and they strive to integrate the concept of gender equality into other local programs as well.

The municipality undertakes measures for sensitization and emancipation of the population on the topic of equality by organizing various events, fora, lectures and protest marches during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. Whenever possible, they publicly speak about the concept of gender equality and the equal rights of men and women.

Shtip has a Local Action Plan for the Advancement of Roma, which includes Roma women. The municipality gathers information about the specific needs of Roma women through visits by the mayor to urban communities, as well as through everyday communication in the municipal offices, where citizens can share their problems and propose potential solutions. The municipal administration, and in particular the Equal Opportunities Coordinator is always at disposal for all needs related to ethnic communities, including the Roma community and Roma women.

On the part of the municipality it is highlighted that there is generally low interest among women, including Roma women, to participate in public debates and discussions. It is common practice for men to attend these events even though the municipality makes attempts to inform the overall public equally through public calls. At such events, families oftentimes send a male representative to speak on their behalf.

Each year, the municipality announces a public call through the Local Economic Development Program to fund NGOs applying with projects aimed at improving women's rights in all spheres, including the rights of Roma women. NGOs receive additional points provided that their projects contribute to improving the position of women in the municipality. This call is an opportunity for any NGO to apply and receive appropriate funding to work on a specific issue.

Representatives from the Office for Community Relations have perceived several problems faced by the Roma population, primarily related to housing, education (insufficient command of the Macedonian language, school absenteeism), hurdles in communication with state institutions (such as lack of birth registration for newborns) and infrastructure issues for Roma residing in rural areas.

As far as education is concerned, the municipality is of the opinion that stereotypes and prejudices about the education of Roma girls still prevail within the local community. In practice, many do not pursue their education beyond primary school, although there are positive examples of girls completing secondary and even tertiary education. There are also instances where, due to the social and economic conditions of Roma families, children join their parents in seasonal jobs, which leads to absenteeism from school.

The municipality is attempting to address the issue of incomplete education by enabling children who dropped out prematurely to complete their education. Last year, a project for adult education was implemented at the Goce Delchev Primary School, allowing people, including Roma girls, to complete their primary education.

Roma girls are also engaged in other activities supported by the municipality. For instance, last year, during self-defense training sessions for girls — especially those from vulnerable groups, such as single mothers and young girls — Roma girls were also present.

Findings from the focus groups – opinions and attitudes of the Roma women

Roma women in Shtip face discrimination in accessing public goods and services (such as entering swimming pools, cafés, shops, etc.) as well as in state institutions (such as using healthcare services and the like). They fail to report these cases due to their belief that even if they did, nothing would be resolved. In the past, there was a Roma woman in the Municipal Council to whom they would report the problems they encountered.

To date, the municipality has not invited them to participate in any public discussion of a program. They reckon that the municipality is not doing enough to enhance the living conditions of Roma women. The infrastructure situation is particularly grave; for example, when it rains, they are forced to walk through mud, and consequently children do not attend school.

Some of the participants have attended a few trainings, but only those organized by non-governmental organizations.

Most Roma women have not completed primary education, are unaware of their rights, are unable to help their children with schoolwork and cannot communicate well in Macedonian when going to institutions. They do not know how to navigate the system, assert their rights in cases of discrimination or where to seek help, and above all they lack the courage to protect themselves.

A vast number of Roma women have difficulty finding employment due to their low level of education. Those who are employed stated that they searched for work for a prolonged period of time and some are dissatisfied with their working conditions. It is not uncommon for them to be belittled by coworkers or customers.

Even though they have mobile phones and personal bank accounts, older women still consider themselves subordinate to men in the family because men still have the final say. There is a shift in this attitude among younger women and they believe they can express their own opinions. Roma women seldom own property in her own name, and only young Roma women who have completed university studies and are employed might have a driver's license.

Child marriages still prevail and are usually arranged by families. Those who pursue their education have opportunities to become scholarship beneficiaries.

Roma women in Shtip do not believe they can initiate or influence the resolution of issues relevant to them or instigate initiatives for change.

Conclusion: The Municipality of Shtip includes gender integration in its programs and is aware of the unresolved issues faced by Roma women, particularly regarding infrastructure. In terms of discrimination and equal opportunities, the municipality collaborates with non-governmental organizations and makes endeavors to address some of the issues via projects. Roma women need additional encouragement and empowerment in order to actively participate in submitting initiatives to the municipality and in creating local programs that would be beneficial to them. Furthermore, they need to work on changing traditional patriarchal norms and relations.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ When drawing up programs for equal opportunities for women and men, municipalities should apply an intersectional approach and ensure that Roma women are visible and represented in the municipal programs.
- ▶ Mechanisms are to be introduced to identify the challenges faced by Roma women at the local level and to duly address them in the municipal programs. The detection of challenges and discriminatory practices can also be attained by means of heightened cooperation between municipalities and women's organizations working at the local level.
- ▶ When developing programs in the municipality, an analysis of the requests filed by Roma women is to be conducted in order to develop evidence-based policies. Municipalities should be incited to introduce e-platforms for recording such requests.
- ▶ Municipalities should be proactive in taking actions to detect issues experienced by the most marginalized communities and the forms of discrimination they are subjected to, rather than relying solely on initiatives from civil society organizations.
- ▶ Human rights trainings should be reinstigated for employees in public institutions and in municipal administrations.
- ▶ Initiatives should be launched for the implementation of programs for non-discrimination and combating violence and child marriages at the local level through schools starting from early childhood.
- ▶ Raising public awareness about protection mechanisms against discrimination through targeted activities and methods so as to ensure that the information reaches various target groups. In cooperation with non-governmental organizations, trainings should be conducted on how to use phones to obtain information from the Municipality, central government and all other institutions in order to bring women Roma closer to the information published and relevant to them.
- ▶ An initiative should be launched so that, when publishing reports on received and answered requests for access to public information, the data shall also be disaggregated by gender, age, municipality and by field.

- ▶ The capacities of the Ministry competent with monitoring the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and the Law on Protection against Discrimination are to be reinforced, particularly in terms of sanctioning municipalities that do not comply with all legal provisions.
- ▶ Educational campaigns are to be initiated so as to raise awareness about CEDAW and the rights under the Convention. Such campaigns are to be available in Romani language, especially in municipalities with a higher concentration of Roma population.
- ▶ An integrated system for collection, analysis and public dissemination of data disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, age and location should be established. This system is to cover all areas affecting women's rights (health, education, social protection and justice).
- ▶ A gender perspective must be integrated in the program budgets of all institutions at the national level, with clearly allocated funds for activities aimed at advancing gender equality.
- ▶ In the planning and revision process, every sectoral plan or strategy (for example: health, education, social protection or economy) must include a gender impact analysis relying on data disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity and other relevant grounds.
- ▶ When drawing up national-level programs concerning women and their rights, a practice must be established to have them developed in consultation with women and organizations that represent them.

Annex 1

Monitoring of the Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) at the National Level

Legal Framework and Protection against Discrimination

- Has the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination been adopted? Provided that it has been, does it secure protection against gender discrimination and protection against multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination?
- Is there a law that recognizes gender violence against women, including sexual violence as well, as a form of discrimination? Does the Law on Protection against Violence and Domestic Violence on Women recognize all forms of gender based violence on women and does it introduce legal remedies for the affected victims?
- Has an implementation plan been devised for the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, ensuring an emphasis on Roma women, rural women, migrant women, asylum seekers and refugees, women engaged in prostitution and women with disabilities?

Access to Justice

- Have mechanisms and guidelines been developed for seeking reparations in cases of discrimination based on sex or gender, including restitution, compensation and other civil legal remedies, rehabilitation and various forms of protection and support?
- Have amendments to the Family Law been made in order to abolish any form of mandatory mediation and/or reconciliation in cases of gender-based violence against women?

National System for Empowerment of Women

- Have Equal Opportunities Commissions for Women and Men been set up in all municipalities and have strategies/programs been drawn up to build the capacity and strengthen the role and performance of these commissions?
- How is the effectiveness of the local Equal Opportunities Commissions monitored? Has a new Action Plan for Gender Equality been adopted following the 2018–2020 Plan?

- Has a monitoring mechanism been introduced for the national action plans, as well as for the implementation of legislation and public with reference to advancement of women?
- Does the new plan foresee interim special measures to address exclusion and multiple forms of discrimination faced by Roma women, women and girls with disabilities as well as by rural women?
- Has a national gender equality entity been established with due mandate, autonomy and financial resources?

Gender-Based Violence against Women

- Have amendments been made to the Criminal Code so as to ensure that the definition of rape and other sexual crimes is based on lack of consent and the removal of the requirement that penetration be an element of the criminal offense?
- Has a comprehensive strategy been adopted to prevent all forms of gender-based violence against women, to address the root causes of gender-based violence and to address situations of increased risk for women with disabilities, women engaged in prostitution and women in all forms of detention?

Engagement in Political and Public Life

- Are quotas foreseen in the Electoral Law for the election of mayors at the local level?
- Are there strategies and programs in place to facilitate and promote the inclusion of women in political and public life, especially with reference to women belonging to marginalized groups?

Education

- Has mandatory age-appropriate sexual education been integrated into school curricula, including education on sexual and reproductive health and rights?

Employment

- Does the Law on Labor Relations entail equality between men and women concerning the retirement age?
- Is paternity leave compulsory for fathers? Does paternity leave exist in practice, and how long is it?
- Have measures been adopted for the registration and recognition of the work performed by rural women, and have provisions been adopted to acknowledge their rights to social benefits, including pensions and other social protection allowances?

Healthcare

- Have amendments been made to the Law on Termination of Pregnancy to ensure the removal of preconditions for access to abortion, such as mandatory pre-abortion medical counseling, waiting periods and ultrasound examinations, as well as for provision of quality post-abortion healthcare services for women?

Roma Women

- Have measures, including interim special measures, been adopted to combat intersectional discrimination against Roma women and girls, including discrimination faced in education, employment, healthcare and housing?
- Have specific programs been devised to alleviate poverty and promote social inclusion of Roma women and girls?

Marriage and Family Relations

- Have amendments been made to the Criminal Code so as to ensure that the definition of non-marital children includes children between the ages of 16 and 18?
- Has the definition of marital property been revised so that marital rights include pension entitlements and other employment-related benefits in addition to future earnings? Have other legal measures been adopted, as needed to eliminate economic disparities between women and men following divorce, including explicit recognition of all career-related assets, such as earning potential as part of the allocation between spouses upon divorce or considered when awarding alimony?
- Have measures and protocols been adopted for the Centers for Social Work so as to ensure that gender-based violence against women at home is taken into consideration in child custody decisions?

Other International Instruments

- Has North Macedonia ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families?

Cyber Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

- Does national legislation recognize online gender-based violence and harassment?

Annex 2

Focus Group Questions for Roma Women

TOPIC: Discrimination

1. Have you ever experienced discrimination or harassment in any area of your life (education, healthcare, obtaining documents from institutions, going to the municipality for a document)? If yes, did you report it, and to whom? Was your case resolved? (Please describe the situation.)
2. Are you employed? If no – why not? Do you happen to be working informally (without a contract)?
3. If yes – Are you satisfied with the conditions, your salary, and how your colleagues treat you? Did you face any obstacles when deciding to get a job?
4. Have you ever had a problem in public (on the street, in a store, at the market, in the park) just because you are a Roma woman?
5. Have you ever had any unpleasant situations or experienced discrimination from an official, such as a government employee, medical personnel, etc.?
6. Do you know any girls (or girls' families) who marry off their daughters before they finish high school?
7. Do you own any property in your name?
8. Do you have access to the Internet?
9. Do you have personal bank account? Do you possess a phone? Do you have a driver's license?
10. Do you, as a woman, have/enjoy the same rights as men (the opposite sex)?
11. Can you freely express your opinion at any time? Yes / No
12. Why is that so?
13. Do you believe that the local self-government/municipality recognize your basic human rights? Yes / No
14. Why is that so?
15. What other problems do Roma women face in your municipality?
16. Have you ever been invited by the municipality to express your opinion or to participate in the review/perusal of a program?

17. Do you have a community representative who represents the interests of Roma women at the local level?
18. Do you think you could raise a question or proposal to change current practices/ mindset within the Roma population—especially among the older generation— regarding shifts in general awareness/culture/customs about encouraging Roma women’s entrepreneurship? If yes, how would you do it and what measures would you apply?
19. When voting, do you decide independently and freely who to vote for?
20. Have you ever participated in any leadership program or training for political engagement?

Questions for Young Roma Women

Additional questions for young girls regarding education and career opportunities:

- Have you had the opportunity to participate in scholarship programs?
- Has anyone ever discouraged you from pursuing higher education?
- What are the biggest obstacles you face when choosing a career?

Annex 3

Questions for Municipalities regarding the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), with an emphasis on Roma women and girls

PART 1 – Questions related to Human Resources

1. How many Roma women are employed in the municipal administration? What positions do they hold?
2. Are there any Roma women involved in municipal councils or other governing bodies?

PART 2 – Questions related to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women at the local level

1. As municipalities, are you aware of your obligations regarding the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women?
2. As for any municipal document, such as a program, strategy or municipal statute, have you included a definition of what constitutes discrimination against women and do you ban discrimination against women on the basis of ethnicity or nationality (particularly regarding Roma women)?
3. Is the principle of equality between women and men embedded into local policies, and if yes, in which documents?
4. Has the municipality undertaken adequate measures, through its programs, to provide for full development and advancement of women in order to guarantee the realization and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all areas—especially political, social, economic, and cultural? Please elaborate on the relevant undertaken measures pertaining to Roma women in this context.
5. Are there any affirmative measures in place aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women (general or specific measures such as quota systems for women and especially for Roma women, etc.)?
6. Please specify the amount of financial resources allocated by the municipality for the advancement of the status of women along with the applicable programs and budget line(s). Are there affirmative measures specifically for Roma women? If yes, elaborate on the applicable programs and budget line(s).
7. How much funding is foreseen for the advancement of the status of women for the year 2025 and from which programs and which budget line(s)? Are there any affirmative measures for Roma women? If yes, elaborate on the applicable programs and budget line(s)?

8. Has the municipality undertaken any measures for raising awareness and promoting emancipation among the population regarding equality and equal rights of men and women, and genuine realization of equal rights in all spheres of life?
9. Are there any strategic documents for the advancement of the status of Roma women and their participation in public and political life? If yes, please specify.
10. Does the municipality have a way of being informed about the specific issues Roma women face? Have there been any reported cases of discrimination against Roma women in the last 3 years, and what were the outcomes of the investigations?
11. Are there any pro bono legal services available, and do Roma women have access to them?
12. Do you have knowledge of whether Roma women have been invited and participated in the review/perusal of local programs and proposals, for example, in urban planning?
13. Is there any local practice to mitigate discrimination and pressure on women during elections with a specific emphasis on Roma women?
14. Are you aware whether stereotypes and prejudices still prevail regarding the education of girls and women, especially Roma girls (e.g. expectations about performance, completing higher education, choice of profession, etc.)?
15. Are there any scheduled programs at the local level for girls and women who dropped out of school? What is the access to these programs like? Is there a policy or act that regulates these programs?
16. Does the municipality provide any support for Roma girls who want to engage in sports, especially due to ethnic stereotypes?
17. Does the municipality, in cooperation with schools or NGOs, have a program in place for the prevention of child marriages?
18. Have you identified the specific issues faced by women in rural areas? Is there any financial aid for Roma women in rural areas to help alleviate the burden of economic survival for their families?



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Ромска Асоцијација за Жени и Млади
Romani Asocijacija Dzuvijsenge thaj Ternenge
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