



A N A L Y S I S
OF BARRIERS FACED
BY ROMA WOMEN
AND GUARANTEED
MINIMUM ASSISTANCE
BENEFICIARIES IN
ACCESSING THE
LABOUR MARKET



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Edited by: Bojan Jovanovski

Author: Mila Carovska

English translation by: Radomir Trajković

Layout and graphic design by: Marija Smilevska



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

4	Context	27	Proposals for Improving the Support System for Marginalised Groups Inclusion in the Labour Market
10	Methodology	30	Conclusion
12	Results from the Findings (Qualitative and Quantitative)		
18	Barriers Faced by Roma Women and Guaranteed Minimum Assistance Beneficiaries in Accessing the Labour Market		

Context

The Republic of North Macedonia is facing high unemployment and inactivity rates in its population (aged 15-64), at 17.5% and 34.9%. In the European Union, these rates stand at 6.9% and 26.4%, respectively. Two population groups in the Republic of North Macedonia are particularly exposed to the risk of unemployment and inactivity: young people and women. At the end of the first semester of 2019, youth (aged 15-24) unemployment was 34.9%, whereas the rate of young people (aged 15-29) that were neither employed nor involved in education or training in 2016 was 31.2%. Women are particularly characteristic for their high inactivity rate in the labour market.

At the end of the first semester in 2019, 53.3% of women older than 15 were outside the labour market. An additional characteristic of labour statistics in general, and particularly concerning young people and women, is that this situation is of structural, long-term character. Macedonian unemployment shows several structural characteristics. Majority of the unemployed people have completed secondary education, meaning that people are facing unemployment and potentially long-term job seeking after leaving school. A total of 56% of all unemployed people in 2017 had been awaiting employment for 4 or more years, whereas 78% of the unemployed people were long-term unemployed.

It is also characteristic that 18% of the employed people in our country hold no written contracts for their employment, that is, they are treated as informally employed persons.

Long-term unemployment can be detected in the general population, but in young people, and especially in women, it is particularly pronounced. However, they are characterised by another, more important characteristic – their inactivity in the labour market. Women's activity is merely 2/3 of that of men and has remained constant throughout the years. This implies a so-called gender gap in the share of some 25 percentage points, which is almost double than that of the European Union (11.2%). Moreover, the inactive women's structure is particularly unfavourable, with 2/3 of them having completed only primary or lower education, which, together with the extended period of absence from the labour market, renders them exceptionally difficult to employ. As may be expected, the major reason for women's non-participation in the labour market is their work at home, taking care for children and the elderly, but also their non-involvement in education.

The poverty rate, calculated as persons living with less than 60% of the median equivalised disposable income, has seen a downward tendency from 27% in 2010 to 21.5% in 2015, recording a slight stagnation in 2018 at 21.9%. The economic growth, accompanied by favourable tendencies in the labour market (increased employment rate and salaries), increased pensions and social transfers, contributed to a poverty rate reduction over the recent years.

In 2017, the percentage of severely materially deprived persons, or the share of population that could not afford 4 out of 9 needs, stood high at 31.1%. According to age groups, this share is the largest in children (aged 0-17) and was 34.1% in 2017, whereas in the remaining population it stood at 30.2%. The rate of poor or socially excluded people, or the so-called AROPE

indicator, stayed relatively high in 2017: 41.6%. These statistical data portray the social image of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The employment rate in the Roma population is 23%, which is almost twice lower than that of the national average, whereas the unemployment rate in the Roma population is 67%. Employment data about Roma women are even more alarming – only 8%, indicating great challenges ahead and a drastic gender gap. At the same time, Roma community is facing a significant rate of informal jobs – some 25% of the population works informally. The most common informal jobs that Roma men are involved in include: trade, taxi services, construction and agriculture; whereas Roma women are typically engaged in: trade and cleaning services. These data merely underline the need for committed efforts to be invested in reducing the unemployment and the informal work in the Roma community, particularly among women. Significant measures need to be taken to create conditions and opportunities for decent employment and economic independence, which will contribute to improving the overall socio-economic situation of the community.

Around 23% of the Roma people are not registered with the Employment Service Agency, believing that they cannot benefit from registering. Only 7% of Roma children of pre-school age are enrolled in kindergartens. A total of 75% of Roma children aged 6-18 are enrolled in school, which is a devastating piece of information, considering the fact that both primary and secondary education in our country are mandatory. Lack of financial resources is the most important reason for their failure to attend kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. The second most frequent reason reported by parents was the remoteness of schools from their neighbourhoods. About 8% of Roma families have reported cases of discrimination against their children in the education system. Roma people have poorer health status compared to the general population. According to the basic health indicators, life expectancy in the Roma population is 10 years shorter than the national average.

The social assistance system in the Republic of North Macedonia can be described as categorial, rather than universal, as it guarantees the minimum resources / income for specific population sub-groups, such as unemployed people or persons with disabilities. Until recently, the system was fragmented and comprised many types of programmes, rather than a single, comprehensive programme. There existed a total of 16 separate payment schemes, which were defined by law as 'entitlements', and 2 social programmes. Of these, 11 were social welfare payments, and 5 were child benefits. The main programme was the financial social assistance (FSA). With reforming the social assistance system, the situation significantly changed, and the various social assistance options were consolidated. Challenges

that remain in this area include effective and efficient enforcement of the new laws in the social sector, and practical implementation of the integrated “case management” system, that is, effective cooperation between social work centres and employment centres, which should help the working-age people escape poverty by efficiently integrating the social assistance beneficiaries into the labour market.¹

The reformed social protection system is expected to support the activation of the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in a way that all working-age household members should get involved in the active employment programmes so as to build their capacities for employment and work. This includes mandatory continuous participation in training, as well as accepting the jobs offered. At the same time, beneficiaries will be provided with support to complete their education and acquire skills which will make them competitive in the labour market.

With the new Law on Social Protection, the cooperation between the employment and social protection services should be further promoted and enhanced towards supporting and activating the working-age guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries. Social work centres and the employment centres should cooperate in developing and implementing personalised plans for activation of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries for the purposes of involving them in the active employment measures and addressing the material insecurity of their households. In line with this, the work method with the employment centres’ and social work centres’ beneficiaries has also been changed by introducing the case management model in both these services.

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has revealed the bottle necks in accessing social protection, imposing the need to constantly re-examine the “entry” criteria for gaining access to cash benefits. An overview of the number of beneficiaries of means-tested entitlements (guaranteed minimum assistance, permanent benefits, housing allowances, one-off cash benefits), as well as the number of social pension beneficiaries (a means-tested entitlement under the Law on Social Security of Elderly People) reveals that the means-tested financial assistance from the social protection system covers only 8% of the persons living at risk of poverty.²

1 Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2019), Revised Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme 2022 – 2021 Annual Report. <[https://mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2019pravilnici/New%20node/Annex%201%20Draft_ESRP%20%20\(MKD\)_REVIZIJA%202022-11.12.2019.pdf](https://mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2019pravilnici/New%20node/Annex%201%20Draft_ESRP%20%20(MKD)_REVIZIJA%202022-11.12.2019.pdf)>

2 According to the most recent available data from the State Statistical Office and Eurostat, and in compliance with the Income and Living Conditions Survey methodology, 448,000 people lived at risk of poverty in 2019 (income is taken as the basis for calculating poverty, and the poverty threshold has been set at 60% of the median equivalised disposable income).

Enhancing the activation of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries has been a constant commitment, and following the adoption of the 2019 Law on Social Protection, a range of activities have been taken, including: development of 3,300 personalised plans for activating the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries; involving 1,075 guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in the active employment measures; establishing an electronic information exchange between social work centres and employment centres. However, there is a set of challenges affecting the implementation and the effectiveness of activation, including: engagement of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in seasonal or temporary work providing an income greater than the one offered through the activation measures; lack of motivational trainings for the less employable guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries (people without education or with primary education); lack of continuous systemic cooperation between social work centres (SWC) and employment centres (EC) etc.³

The activation process is implemented with financial support from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) as part of the project “Activation of Vulnerable Groups in the Labour Market”. In 2021, the active employment measures and programmes involved a total of 118 people, and the employment services (the Counselling and Motivation Programme) included 781 people, guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries. Related to the activation process for guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, an electronic information exchange system was established between the social work centres and the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia concerning the development of personalised activation plans, with activation plans being developed for 2,118 people. The share of unemployed people – entitlement beneficiaries from the social work centres – in the total number of participants in the active employment measures and programmes and labour market services, standing at 6.5% in active measures and 17.6% in services, has increased compared to the previous years, however, still remaining well below the expectations, that is, below the set annual target of 30%. The circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic (such as lax requirements for acquiring the right to GMA) may partially explain the poorer results. A recent Impact Assessment Study of Social Benefits on Activation of Vulnerable Groups in the Labour Market has shown that the weak activation is resulting from institutional challenges, disincentives

³ Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Labour and social Policy (2022). Revised Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme 2022 – 2021 Annual Report. <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/sep/Izvestaj%20za%20implementacija%20za%202021%20na%20Revidiranata%20ESRP%202022_M%D0%9A.pdf>

inherent to the social protection system, additional earning opportunities by doing informal work, discouragement and family relations of GMA beneficiaries. The 'Activation of unemployed Roma and other people at risk of social exclusion' service is implemented by setting up a network of Roma mentors and through programmes based on international experiences (the Acceder Programme). As part of this service, the unemployed people can access a team of mentors whose role is to motivate and regularly inform the unemployed Roma people and other people at risk of social exclusion about employment opportunities or about opportunities to enhance their employability, and also to help establish the communication with the local business sector so as to facilitate the access to the workforce from the target groups. This model has been implemented in two pilot municipalities with significant Roma population, but also with well-developed business environment, by establishing a pilot employment support centre for Roma people and other people exposed to the risk of social exclusion, in partnership with two selected civil society organisations. This service involved a total of 3,422 persons, of which 1,721 women (50%) and 1,031 young people under 29 years of age (30%). In 2021, a total of 3,971 people were supplied with information. For 3,422 people (1,721 women and 1,031 young people) questionnaires were filled out for profiling and evaluating the professional capacities of the unemployed people in order to involve them in active measures. Some of the participants – 154 (87 women and 78 young people) got involved in the active employment measures, and some were directly employed in the private sector – 186 (93 women and 91 young people under 29).⁴

4 Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Labour and social Policy (2022). Revised Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme 2022 – 2021 Annual Report. <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/sep/Izvestaj%20za%20implementacija%20za%202021%20na%20Revidiranata%20ESRP%202022_M%D0%9A.pdf>

Methodology

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the barriers faced by Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in accessing the labour market and to formulate proposals for improving the public policies that can help address the challenges these groups of people are facing. Moreover, the document may serve advocacy purposes with the central authorities for including new models as a functional segment of the specific measures and activities that will encourage the inclusion of marginalised groups in the labour market.

The methodology of this document is based on two pillars: desk research and field work.

The analysis involves a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative techniques. To make sure the analysis is bias- or influence-free, a data triangulation approach will be integrated to better control the quality. To this end, the following techniques will be applied:

- ▶ **DESK RESEARCH / COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW** - Gathering and analysing relevant documents, studies, policies, strategies, mapping the potential stakeholders/target groups, and communicating with stakeholders; developing an appropriate scenario for consultation meetings; preparing and strategizing for the meetings. Account will be given to data from a 2022 analysis of barriers to Roma women's uptake of active employment measures conducted by the Equal Employment Opportunities Advocacy Group – Employed Roma Women = Empowered Women;
- ▶ **DATA COLLECTION FOCUS GROUP WITH TARGET POPULATIONS** - Gathering data and looking into the barriers to labour market inclusion from the experiences of Roma women and women guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries;
- ▶ **RECOMMENDATIONS VERIFICATION FOCUS GROUP WITH TARGET POPULATIONS** - Double-checking the analysis recommendations with Roma women and women guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries;
- ▶ **CONSULTATION MEETINGS** with relevant stakeholders and key participants from various levels and sectors. This segment will include discussions with primary and secondary stakeholders so as to obtain an in-depth qualitative understanding of activation process implementation;
- ▶ **COMPARATIVE METHOD FOR ANALYSING THE DATA RECEIVED** and collating the data with the results obtained from the desk research and consultation meetings;
- ▶ **IDENTIFYING THE BEST PRACTICES AND SUCCESS STORIES** to help formulate the recommendations for developing functional activation models.

For the purposes of this analysis, administrative data related to guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries were used as retrieved from the 2022 databases of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

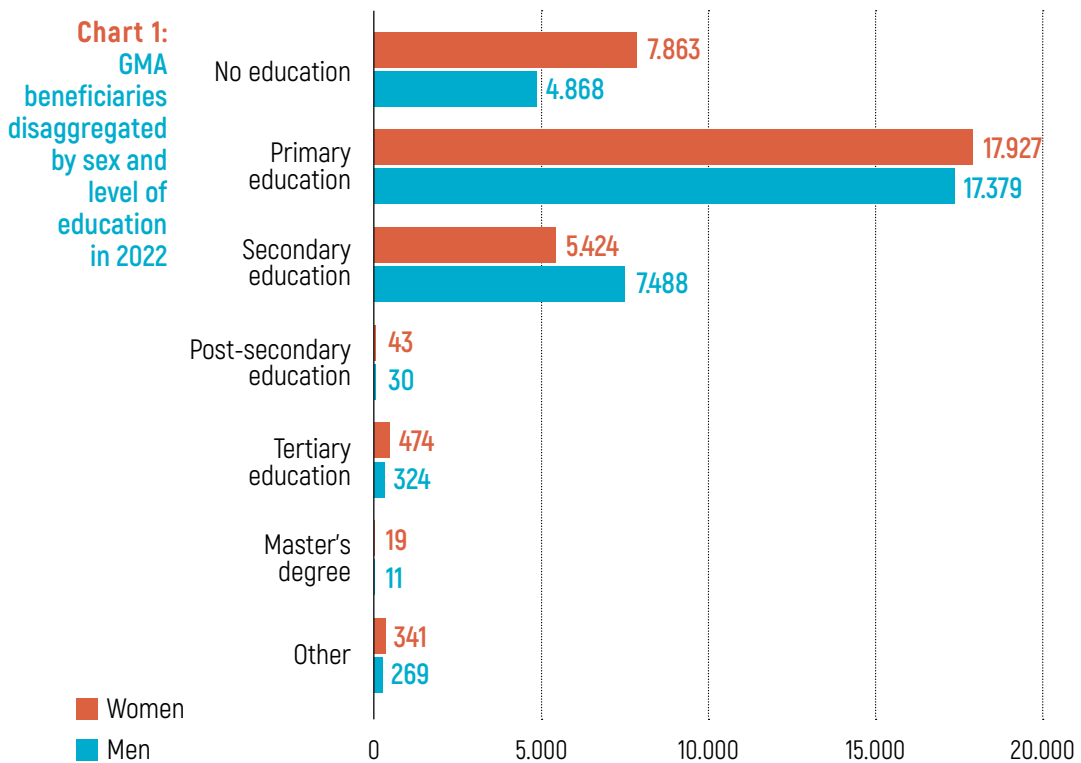
Results from the Findings

Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries are population groups that face many barriers in accessing the labour market. Although there exist legal and institutional frameworks for protection against discrimination, these are often not enforced and applied in practice, leaving the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries to deal with discrimination.

It is important to point out the impact institutions have on access to labour market, because this access is controlled by such institutions as the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the State Labour Inspectorate, the Employment Service Agency etc. These institutions ought to enforce the laws but, in many cases, they fail to protect the rights of the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, thus limiting the employment opportunities for these people.

These barriers include: discrimination, poor working conditions, lack of training and qualifications, insufficient access to information about job vacancies, lack of market powers etc. To address them, long-term measures are required that will improve the labour market position of the Roma people and of the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries.

The total number of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries is 62,460; of which 32,091 (51%) are men, and 30,369 (49%) are women.



The data presented in Chart 1 reveal that majority of GMA beneficiaries, or 17,927 women and 17,379 men, have completed primary education. This indicates that primary education is the most common level of education in all GMA beneficiaries, regardless of their sex.

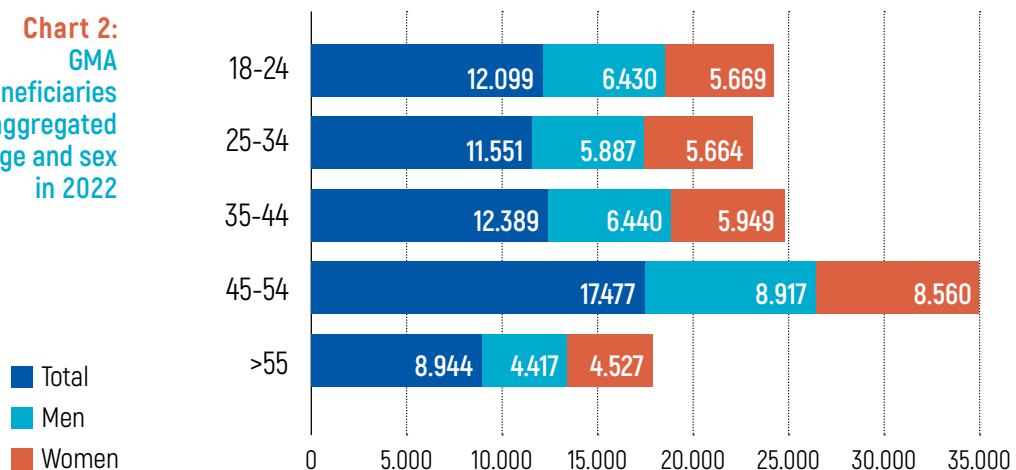
In higher levels of education, several interesting gender aspects can be observed. Only 798 beneficiaries (474 women and 324 men) hold a higher education degree, indicating a small number of people with this level of education in GMA beneficiaries. The same trend can be noticed in master's degree holders, where 30 beneficiaries hold these qualifications, of which 19 are women and 11 are men. However, it is evident that there are more

women with completed higher education than men. This difference is in correlation with the national education structure.⁵

Moreover, it is also noticeable that fewer women GMA beneficiaries have completed secondary education, or 5,424; unlike 7,488 men who have completed this level of education.

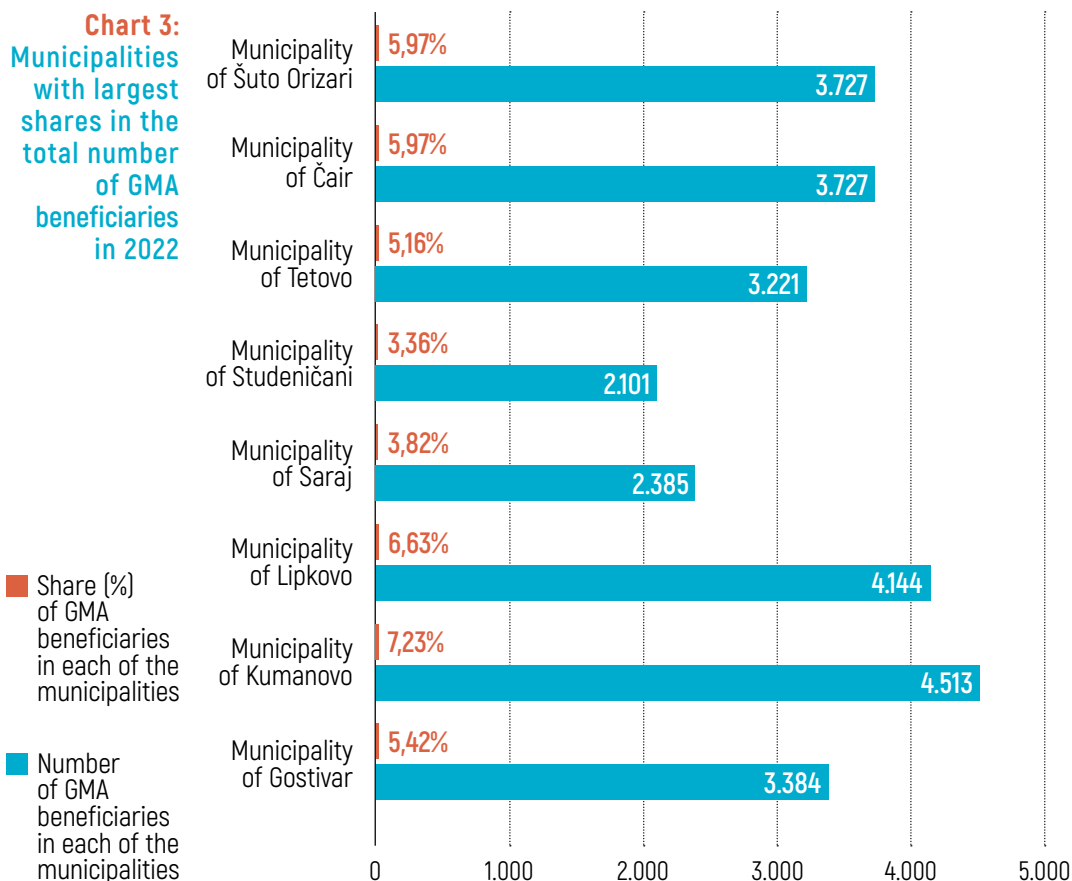
A total of 7,863 women and 4,868 men GMA beneficiaries have not completed their primary education. This speaks of the many challenges existing in the education system and the need to support the people without primary education, particularly women.

Chart 2:
GMA
beneficiaries
disaggregated
by age and sex
in 2022



Age structure data about the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, as presented in Chart 2, reveal that majority of beneficiaries, or 28%, belong to the 45-54 age group. The second largest age group is that between 35 and 44 years of age, with 19.8%. The younger age groups, those between 18 and 24 and between 25 and 34, account for 19.4% and 18.5% of the beneficiaries, respectively. People older than 55 account for 14.3%. It is evident that no drastic differences exist between men and women in all age groups, showing a tendency of equal distribution of social assistance according to age and gender.

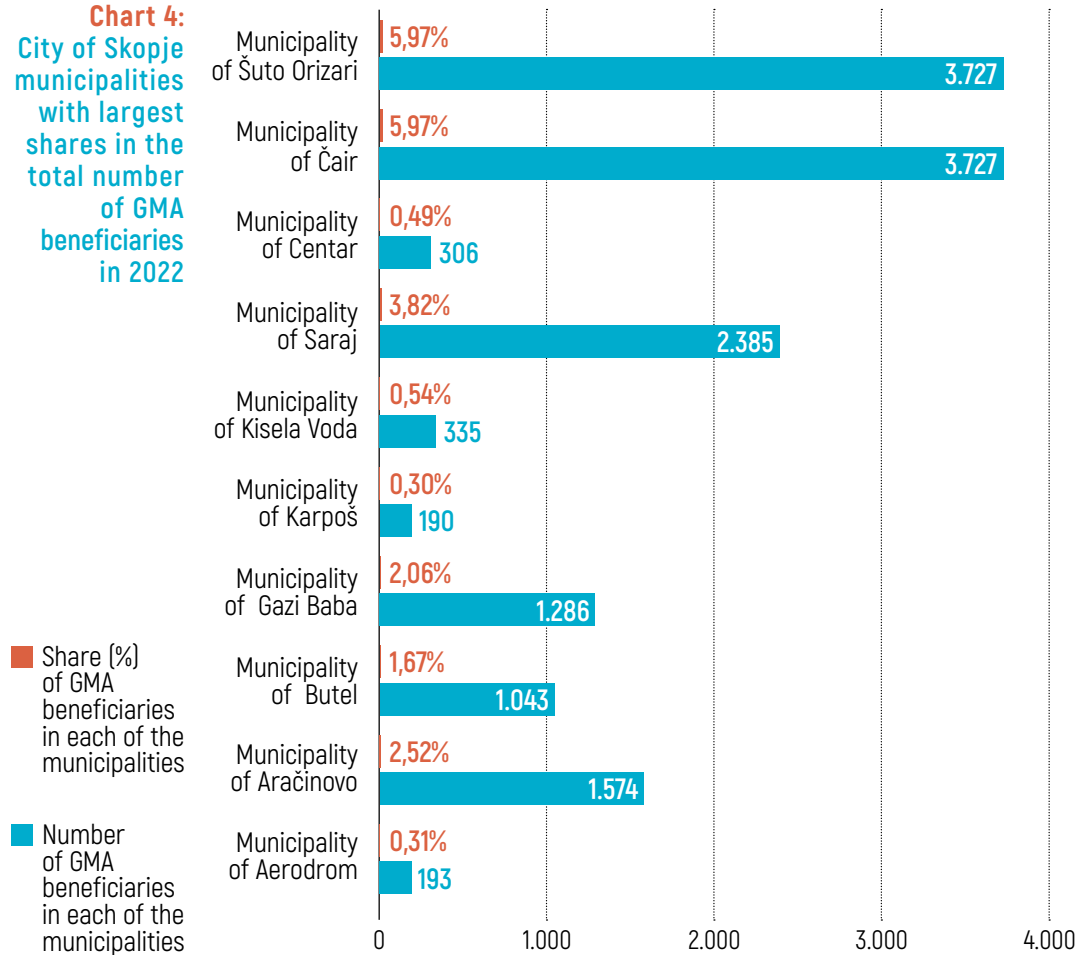
⁵ State Statistical Office (2023). Women and Men in North Macedonia. <<https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziPoslednaPublikacija.aspx?id=23>>



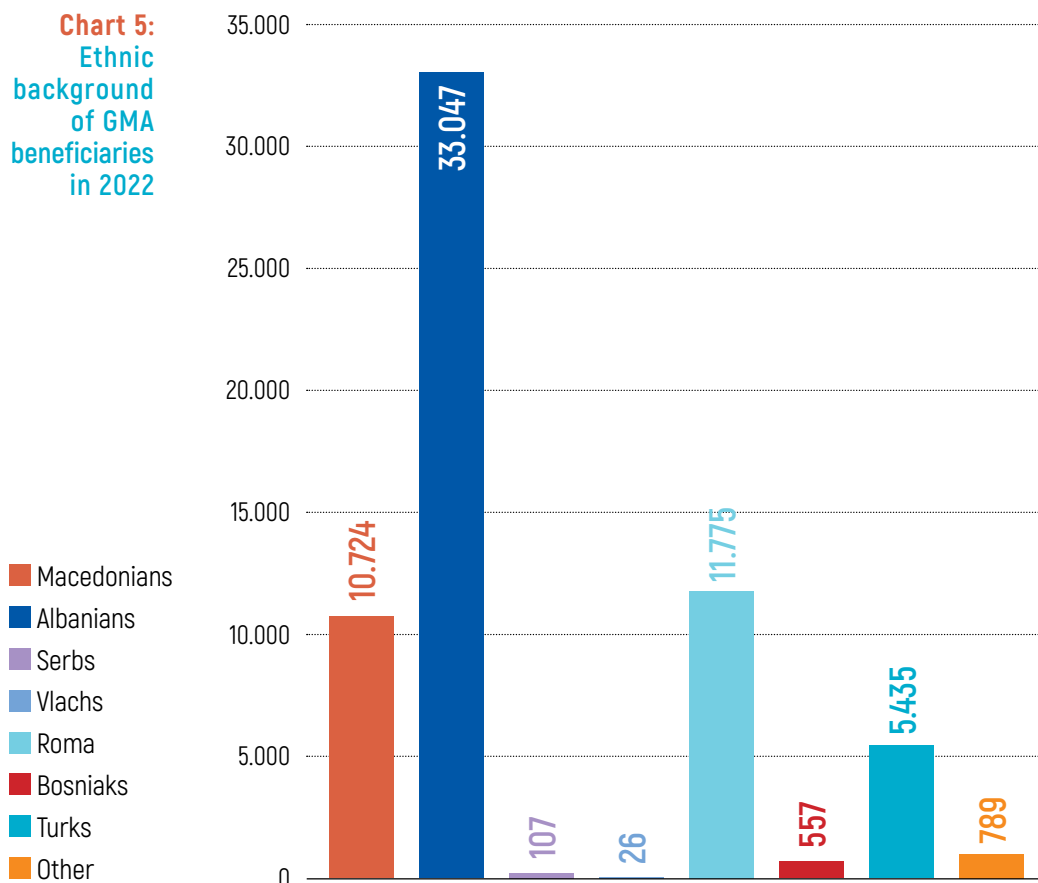
The analysis of municipality data about guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries – Chart 3 – reveals interesting trends and differences in the share of each municipality.

Majority of GMA beneficiaries live in the Municipality of Kumanovo, with a total of 4,513 persons, which accounts for 7.23% of the total number of beneficiaries in the country. This makes Kumanovo a municipality with the largest uptake of the right to guaranteed minimum assistance. Next follows the Municipality of Lipkovo, with 4,144 GMA beneficiaries, representing 6.63% of the total number of beneficiaries. Significant number of beneficiaries can also be found in the Municipalities of Čair and Šuto Orizari, with both these municipalities having an equal number of 3,727 GMA beneficiaries, each accounting for 5.97% of the total number of beneficiaries. Municipalities of Gostivar and Tetovo have a similar number of beneficiaries, 3,384 and 3,221 respectively, or a share of 5.42% and 5.16%. Municipalities of Saraj and Studeničani have the smallest number of GMA beneficiaries, with 2,385 and 2,101 people, or a share of 3.82% and 3.36%.

Chart 4:
City of Skopje
municipalities
with largest
shares in the
total number
of GMA
beneficiaries
in 2022



The data in Chart 4 present the distribution of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries per municipalities of the City of Skopje. It can be concluded that each municipality's uptake of the right to the guaranteed minimum assistance varies significantly. The lowest share of 0.30% is recorded in the Municipality of Karpoš and in the Municipality of Aerodrom, where the number of GMA beneficiaries is very small and equals 190 and 193 respectively. Municipalities of Kisela Voda and Centar have a share of 0.54% and 0.49% respectively, showing that they, too, have a relatively low presence of GMA beneficiaries. Next follow Municipality of Butel with a share of 1.67% and Municipality of Aračinovo with 2.52%. Municipalities of Gazi Baba and Saraj have a share of 2.06% and 3.82%, indicating that the number of GMA beneficiaries in these municipalities is significant. The largest number of GMA beneficiaries can be found in the Municipalities of Čair and Šuto Orizari, with the same number of 3,727 beneficiaries, or a share of 5.97%.



It can be noticed on Chart 5 that citizens of Albanian ethnic background have the largest number of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in the country, with a total of 33,047 people, accounting for 52.91% of the total number of beneficiaries. The next ethnic group are the Roma, with a total of 11,775 beneficiaries, or 18.85% of the total number of GMA beneficiaries.

When analysing the share of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries within each ethnic community in the country, interesting differences can be observed. Roma people have a significant share of 25.36%, whereas Albanians have a share of 7.41% and Turks of 7.66%. Macedonians, Serbs and Vlachs have the lowest number of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, with each community's share standing below 1%.

Barriers Faced by Roma Women and Guaranteed Minimum Assistance Beneficiaries in Accessing the Labour Market

Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in the Republic of North Macedonia face many barriers in accessing the labour market, including:

Discrimination and stereotypes

Roma people face systematic discrimination and stereotypes in their access to the labour market. They are often looked down as uneducated, unqualified and incapable of work, resulting in lack of decent jobs for them.⁶ According to the 2021 report on Macedonia by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 13% of

⁶ World Bank and European Commission (2019). Breaking the Cycle of Roma Exclusion in the Western Balkans. <<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/961361552440068008-0080022019/original/RomaWesternBalkansExecutiveSummaryMacedonian3.12.2019.pdf>>

the Roma people have felt discriminated against at work only for being Roma.⁷ According to the reports of target group participants, the situation in the Republic of North Macedonia over the last 3 years has changed but slightly, as great many working-age people go abroad to work, so, faced with the lack of workforce, employers tend to employ larger number of Roma people, also reducing the levels of discrimination at work.

“Now it’s not like before, there is work for Roma people, too; there are no workers, so they have to accept us.” – Statement by a first target group participant

However, the 2022 report by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination finds that racial discrimination still exists in our country, primarily aimed at our fellow citizens of the Roma community. Discrimination against this ethnic community was established by the Commission on examples of segregation in neighbourhoods where they are settled, segregation of Roma children in primary schools, lack of access of the Roma people to the healthcare system and gynaecological services, lack of access of the Roma neighbourhoods to water, as well as lack of access to social goods and services.⁸

The guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries face discrimination by the society, including by employers, on account of their poverty and socio-economic status.⁹ According to the World Bank’s Action Plan for Recovery of Growth and Jobs in North Macedonia,¹⁰ many of the employers fail to perceive these people as a potential, and refuse to include them in training,

7 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022). Roma in 10 EU Countries. <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf>

8 Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (2023). 2022 Annual Work Report of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. <<https://kszd.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/%D0%93%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%98%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98-2022.pdf>>

9 Coalition “Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalised Communities” MARGINS Skopje, Network for Protection against Discrimination (2022). Monitoring Report on Implementation of the Law on Social Protection regarding Social Services for the period June 2019 – July 2021. <http://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ZSZ_GolemDokument_WEB_v002.pdf>

10 World Bank (2020). Republic of North Macedonia: Action Plan for Recovery of Growth and Jobs. <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/809991603810854005/pdf/Republic-of-North-Macedonia-Action-Plan-for-Recovery-of-Growth-and-Jobs.pdf>>

believing that they have low level of motivation and poor soft skills.

Statements by target group participants also reveal that the fear of being fired and the discomfort in relations with employers, as well as the barriers to returning to the social protection system, keep the Roma women and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in a passive position.

“If we get a job, and then get fired, we should wait for 3 months to be able to re-apply for social assistance. We shouldn’t be made to wait at all, if we provide evidence that we’ve been fired. If we lie and do have some cash inflow, then let them sanction us, rather than leaving us like this, with nothing to eat for three months.” – Statement by a second target group participant

Low level of education and qualification

The high share of uneducated Roma people is one of the major reasons for their being unable to secure decent work. According to the Employment Service Agency’s data, 92% of the unemployed people have either incomplete or completed primary education; 7.7% have incomplete or completed secondary education; whereas 0.3% of the unemployed people have completed post-secondary, higher or master education. From a gender perspective, the share of women without primary or with completed primary education stands at 94%; 6% have incomplete or completed secondary education; and only 1% have post-secondary or higher education. According to the waiting time, 66% of the long-term unemployed have no education at all or have completed primary education only; whereas 3% of the long-term unemployed have incomplete or completed secondary education. From a gender perspective, 72% of the unemployed Roma women are long-term unemployed, with 68% of them having incomplete or completed primary education; whereas 3% have incomplete or completed secondary education.¹¹ Moreover, according to the 2018 – 2019 MICS data,¹² the share of high-school age children who actually attend secondary or

¹¹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2022). Roma Inclusion Strategy 2022 – 2030. <<https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/Strategija%20za%20inkluzija%20na%20Romite%202022-2030%2003-02-2022%20finalna%20verzija.pdf>>

¹² UNICEF (2020). Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2018-2019, North Macedonia and Roma Settlements in North Macedonia. <[https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/9151/file/MK_MICS_FindingsReport%20\(MKD\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/9151/file/MK_MICS_FindingsReport%20(MKD).pdf)>

a higher level of education is 90.9% in the general population, but in the Roma population it stands at 39.4%.

Low level of education may result from various factors, including: discrimination, poverty, child marriages and child labour, but also from the poor quality of education provided in Roma communities, and limiting access to education facilities due to discrimination. Roma children are often discriminated against in education institutions, leading to their dropping out from schools before completing the primary or secondary education.

Target group participants expressed the need for recognising their knowledge and skills acquired informally, in the course of their lives, independently of their formal education.

“If there was a way for us to show what we know, and to show that we know how to work, even though we are not schooled, it would be easier for us to find jobs.” – Statement by a second target groups participant

According to the 2018 – 2019 MICS data, the number of young people aged 15-19 who are married or who live as unmarried couples is 5.6% in the general population, whereas in the Roma population it stands at 22.6%. The same survey finds that the share of children aged 5-17 involved in child labour is 2.9% in the general population, and in the Roma population it stands at 4.1%.

Many of the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries lack appropriate qualifications and skills for work as required by employers. Regarding the education structure, persons with completed primary education account for 60.2% of GMA entitlement holders, followed by those with secondary education (19%) and without primary education (18.5%). The low education level of household members benefiting from the GMA stands as a large barrier to successful transition of these people to employment.¹³

¹³ Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Labour and social Policy (2022). Revised Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme 2022 – 2021 Annual Report. <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/sep/Izvestaj%20za%20implementacija%20za%202,021%20na%20Revidiranata%20ESRP%202022_M%D0%9A.pdf>

Socio-economic marginalisation

Roma people are facing socio-economic marginalisation as a result from the low level of participation in the labour market. Many Roma people live in poverty unable to satisfy their basic needs, such as health care and education. According to the European Commission's 2022 Report on North Macedonia, the number of unemployed Roma is 12,990, seeing a slight reduction from 13,703 in 2021. The number of Roma people who have used the active employment measures is 589, or 5.2% of all beneficiaries. No new measures have been adopted for a targeted approach to Roma. The 2021 Youth Guarantee Scheme covered 979 Roma persons (488 women).¹⁴

Target group participants are concerned that young people coming from families that benefit from the guaranteed minimum assistance may remain socio-economically marginalised on the long run, because the system keeps them indirectly in a passive position, instead of encouraging them to work.

“There is work now, but young people stay at home with their (grand)parents and refuse to get a job that requires registration. They want to get unreported jobs, but this leaves them without pension. That's why young people should be taken separately, and if they happen to find a job, their (grand)parents should not have their benefits revoked.” – Statement by a second target group participant

“Young people should work, and not depend on us. They should earn their own money. It should be possible for us to keep receiving benefits, while they work. We should not depend on each other.” – Statement by a second target group participant

¹⁴ North Macedonia 2021 Report of the European Commission. <<https://www.sep.gov.mk/post/?id=5657>>

“If the young people get jobs, their (grand)parents should not be deregistered from social transfers. Conditions are such that we are forced to live together, but each of us leads their own life; this way young people have to both work for themselves and take care of us.” – Statement by a second target group participant

The Roma employment rate is 23%, almost twice lower than the national average. The Roma unemployment rate stands at 67%. In Roma women, employment rate is only 8%. Still, the Roma community is facing a high rate of informal employment – on average, 25% of the population works informally. The most frequent forms of informal employment of Roma men include trade and taxi services, as well as construction and agriculture; whereas the most frequent forms of informal employment of Roma women include trade and cleaning services. Many Roma families rely on seasonal work in the summer period, during the harvest season. Some 36% of Roma households earn less than 12,000 denars a month; 31% between 12,000 and 24,000 denars; and for 18% this amount ranges between 24,000 and 40,000 denars. Around 48% of Roma families are social assistance beneficiaries. Around 23% of the Roma people are not registered with the Employment Service Agency, believing that they cannot benefit anything from registering.¹⁵

“Cash benefits, although raised, are not sufficient. Let only the electricity bill come in, and all money is gone! What about other expenses?” – Statement by a first target group participant

Socio-economic marginalisation of the Roma people has far-reaching consequences not only for their labour market inclusion, but also for other aspects of their lives. For example, many Roma people face health issues because they have no access to health services, which may lead to an increased number of chronic diseases and reduced working capacities. Also, Roma people's poverty and socio-economic marginalisation affects their children and has adverse consequences on their education and development, limiting the opportunities for breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

¹⁵ Ministry of Labour and social Policy (2022). Revised Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme. <[https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dokumenti/2020/ESRP\(r\)%202,022%20\(MKD\)%20full.pdf](https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dokumenti/2020/ESRP(r)%202,022%20(MKD)%20full.pdf)>

“I can say that young people both receive social transfers and they work. Cash benefits are kind of guaranteed, and the salary is an income plus, thus earning more money. I worked unreported jobs all my life and all was great, I mainly worked for women; but now I can neither work nor do I receive any pension. Had I been registered then, I would have been better off today, having my own pension. I'd like to say that it's better for young people to work on their own, and don't rely on cash benefits.” – Statement by a first target group participant

Guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries lack access to transportation services in their neighbourhoods or, if these services are available there, they cannot afford it, as these services are not free of charge for them, preventing them from exploring job offers in other neighbourhoods or even in other municipalities.

Moreover, banks and other financial institutions create additional problems for the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, who, on account of the transfers they receive and considering the property they own, most often do not qualify for using the financial services such as loans, accounting and other services that can help them start their own business.

Lack of support and services

Roma people and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries are faced with lack of support and services, such as preparation for work, training and practice, according to the information from the World Bank's Action Plan for Recovery of Growth and Jobs in North Macedonia.¹⁶ Many of the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries have never worked or had disruptions in their working experience, which may pose a barrier to their re-employment.

The data received from the Employment Service Agency in 2022 show that 2,417 activation plans were developed for guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, of which 916 were women, including 262 Roma women. In all measures from the overall employment operational plan, a total of 5,243 women were involved, of which only 224 were Roma women; whereas the

¹⁶ World Bank (2020). Republic of North Macedonia: Action Plan for Recovery of Growth and Jobs. <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/809991603810854005/pdf/Republic-of-North-Macedonia-Action-Plan-for-Recovery-of-Growth-and-Jobs.pdf>>

measure 'Economy of care' included 619 women, of which only 45 were Roma women.

Although the labour market activation service does exist, its coverage is still small. Moreover, the accompanying services regarding the provision of psychosocial support and of care for children or other dependents in the household are not provided free of charge and are not guaranteed to the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries.

"I want to work; my husband works, and I also receive the third-child allowance; but it's not enough all four children considered. I used to work, but there was no one to take care of my children, as I worked in shifts, so I couldn't continue. If I find a job now, I can only do the morning shift. It would also be good if the kindergarten was free for me, because, for all 4 children, I'll need to fork over 100 euro only for that. Money is simply not enough this way." – Statement by a third target group participant

Childcare services for preschool- and school-aged children, too, are not fully accessible to Roma people and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, which, on the one hand, affects children's further development, and on the other, it affects their parents' employment opportunities.

"I want to work, but what am I to do with the children? They go to school, but the school ends at 12 o'clock, so someone must take care of them after that; otherwise, we would have to let them roam the streets." – Statement by a third target group participant

"I want to go to work and terminate the social transfers, but who will take care of my children? Kindergartens cost money; which expense to cover first?" – Statement by a first target group participant

Access to digital devices and the Internet

The Internet is crucial for accessing the labour market, as it is often used to seek jobs and connect with potential employers. Roma people, particularly the ones living in poor neighbourhoods, frequently lack access to the social media or do not use them to seek jobs. According to a regional Roma research, 42% of the Roma people have access to computer, in contrast to 72% of the non-Roma population.¹⁷ According to MICS 2018 – 2019,¹⁸ the number of households that have access to the Internet on any device at home is 81.5% in the general population, but 69.8% in the Roma population. These data show that Roma people are facing great challenges in accessing information about job opportunities offered via the Internet and through the social media. In addition to the barriers specified above, other barriers exist, too, such as the lack of access to job information, as well as cultural and language barriers which require exploring to identify their impact in the process of employing the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries.

¹⁷ Ministry of Labour and social Policy (2022). Roma Inclusion Strategy 2022 – 2030. <<https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/Strategija%20za%20inkluzija%20na%20Romite%202022-2030%2003-02-2022%20finalna%20verzija.pdf>>

¹⁸ UNICEF (2020). Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2018-2019, North Macedonia and Roma Settlements in North Macedonia. <[https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/9151/file/MK_MICS_FindingsReport%20\(MKD\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/9151/file/MK_MICS_FindingsReport%20(MKD).pdf)>

Proposals for Improving the Support System for Marginalised Groups Inclusion in the Labour Market

The social protection system should continue to be developed and promoted, as this is a living process and is changing over time. This analysis allows us to perceive the situation on the labour market, including with the Roma people and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries. Based on data analysis (quantitative and qualitative), recommendations can be given on several levels, including systemic changes and recommendations for the different stakeholders.

These recommendations concern systemic changes aimed at: improving the flexibility of the requirements for realising and using the right to guaranteed minimum assistance; introducing a validation system for the non-formal and informal learning; systemically harmonising/increasing the social transfer amounts according to clear economic parameters; guaranteeing slots and exemption from payment in public kindergartens for guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries.

Recommendation 1:

To amend and supplement the Law on Social Protection regarding the criteria and the requirements for realising the right to guaranteed minimum assistance

- A.** The holder of the right to guaranteed minimum assistance or another household member should be allowed to work simultaneously with other household members receiving the guaranteed minimum assistance, for a period of 12 months. Once the 12-month period has run out, a gradual reduction in the social transfer amount is proposed for a period of up to 18 months;
- B.** The 3-month waiting time for re-entering the system should be revoked, i.e. the household should be entered in the social protection system immediately after losing a job or using up the unemployment cash benefit from the Employment Service Agency. Income assessment should be carried out after the entitlement has been realised;
- C.** Children in the household who are of legal age and are guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, once employed, should not be taken into consideration when deciding on the entitlements of other household members. This means that, when a child of legal age finds employment, the parent will be able to continue enjoying the right to guaranteed minimum assistance, despite them living in the same household. This can contribute to the prevention of intergenerational transmission of the use of guaranteed minimum assistance;
- D.** Harmonisation of the guaranteed minimum assistance should be guaranteed by way of legal provisions with clear economic parameters, such as the average or minimum salary.

Recommendation 2:

To amend and supplement the Law on Adult Education

- A.** Validation system should be introduced for the non-formal and informal learning, which will ensure acquiring qualifications for people without qualifications or with low level of qualification, thus allowing for their greater inclusion in the labour market. Introducing one such system will be of huge importance for the process of activation of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries and Roma women that either have no formal education or have incomplete formal education.

Recommendation 3:

To amend and supplement the Law on Child Protection, and the rulebooks arising from it, so as to ensure childcare services for the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries while they are in the process of activation or employment

- A.** Free slots in kindergartens should be guaranteed for children coming from families using the guaranteed minimum assistance and for Roma children. This measure would provide conditions for adult household members to freely seek jobs and get involved in activation measures until their final employment;
- B.** Day-care centres should be organised to uptake the children from these families after school is over, until the end of the working hours or the training hours of their parents.

Recommendation 4:

To introduce a special activation programme for the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries

- A.** Activation of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries is of crucial importance for their social integration and for improving their economic situation. The programme should cover training and qualifications, such as financial support for start-up companies and micro-businesses, but most important of all is to ensure a system for psychosocial support and mentorship. As part of this programme, a special line should be earmarked for guaranteeing participation quota for women in all activities and measures, so as to ensure equal participation of women and men in this programme. Since the capacities of the Employment Service Agency to administer one such programme are limited, it is recommended to involve partners (civil society organisations or companies) that will be able to implement it. Moreover, it would be of great help to invest in infrastructure development in areas inhabited by guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries so as to open new jobs and facilitate the access to these jobs.

All these recommendations concerning the systemic changes and the increased social transfer amounts have the objective to improve the living conditions of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries and enhance their social integration in the society. If properly implemented, these measures have the potential to improve the economic situation of the most vulnerable groups in the society and prevent their social and economic exclusion.

Conclusions

It can be concluded from this analysis that the failure to access the labour market can have serious economic consequences for the Roma women and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries. As many of them live in poverty, having no job may have drastic impacts on their survival capacities. Also, having no jobs brings about additional poverty and inequality, closing the cycle of social and economic exclusion, and leading to transmission of poverty to the next generation.

Social consequences from having no job and from being unable to access the labour market may be drastic. Social exclusion isolates the Roma women and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries from the wider community and exposes them to discrimination.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries are facing significant challenges in accessing the labour market, leaving serious economic and social consequences for the society as a whole.

The analysis of the barriers in accessing the labour market for the Roma women and the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries showed that systemic changes are required to improve their position in the labour market. Recommendations to make the requirements more flexible for realising and using the right to guaranteed minimum assistance, to validate the non-formal and informal learning, and to increase the social transfer amounts are important measures for improving the social protection of these groups and for their inclusion in the labour market.

However, to realise these recommendations, significant changes are required in the legislation and in the social protection system. Moreover, it is important to provide other activation measures for the Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries, such as education and training measures, stimulating employment measures etc. In order to cross from the situation of social dependence to active participation in the labour market, it is necessary to implement integrated measures that will support these groups in their employment efforts and in overcoming the barriers they face.

Recommendations also call for systemic changes in the legislation for increasing the social transfer amounts, activation of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in the labour market, investments in infrastructure, and guaranteed slots in kindergartens and exemption from kindergarten payments for families benefiting from the guaranteed minimum assistance.

If properly implemented, these measures will improve the economic situation of the most vulnerable groups in the society and prevent their social and economic exclusion. Implementation of these recommendations can prove to be a complex process requiring coordination between different institutions and actors. Therefore, it is necessary to design a special programme, make the amendments and supplements to the laws, and allocate sufficient resources to fund these measures.

Overall, the implementation of these recommendations has the potential to have a positive effect on the social inclusion of Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries and on their economic position. These recommendations can help improve the lives of the most vulnerable groups in the society and increase their participation in economy.

