
ROMA REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELLBEING IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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HERA – Health Education and Research Association is the largest non-governmental organisation in the Republic of North Macedonia [working](#) in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). HERA runs several clinics that provide health and social [services](#) for young people and marginalised communities and is a leader organisation in the delivery of [comprehensive sexuality education](#) (CSE) among young people. HERA is one of the leader policy initiators in North Macedonia of advancing the SRHR legal framework and of making sure the national health system services are available to all citizens. Since 2009, HERA has been a [full member association](#) of IPPF, a global provider for advancing SRHR.

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INTRODUCTION

This report reflects the developments in the last reporting year (2023), within the relevant chapters of the acquis related to Roma employment, access to sexual and reproductive rights and social inclusion. This report aims to address the ongoing obstacles of Roma women in accessing employment and social services. It summarises the detected gaps in service provision and the policy and legal framework that impact the social status of Roma women in North Macedonia alongside recommendations for policy improvement.

Exclusion, discrimination, social stereotypes and stigma are main socio-cultural factors that prevent the marginalised groups, especially Roma women, from exercising their human rights. Having access to appropriate employment opportunities and quality services that are non-judgmental and non-discriminatory is key for Roma women to be integrated in the Macedonian society and enjoy their social status as other citizens in the country.

EU accession remains a key goal for the Republic of North Macedonia. Undoubtedly, changes are needed to ensure the realisation of social inclusion and reproductive health of Roma women and we hope that many will be reflected in the next Enlargement Report to ensure continued and ongoing progress for the promotion of social and reproductive rights in the country.



BRIEF SUMMARY OF KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2023

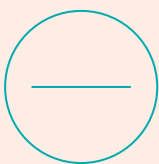
The employment rate in the Roma population is 23%, which is almost twice lower than that of the national average, whereas **the unemployment rate in the Roma population is 67%**. **Employment data about Roma women are even more alarming – only 8%**, indicating great challenges ahead and a drastic gender 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. Although National Employment Operational Plan 2022 envisaged increase of Roma women's coverage with employment measures by 5%, such measures seem **not appropriate** and not tailored to women's needs since they do not contribute to increasing the employment rate of Roma women in the labour market.

The right to Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA) is the most exercised social right by Roma beneficiaries. **No additional actions were taken this year** by the institutions for including the registered GMA recipients in the labour market.

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 Government's budget for **free folic acid for pregnant women** coming from socially disadvantaged groups, including for Roma women, was excluded from the 2022 Preventive Programme for Mothers' and Children's Health, and in 2023 the situation remained the same. Progress has been made in the funding for **regular gynaecological check-ups, laboratory analysis during pregnancy and childbirth** for women who are out of the mandatory health insurance system, which was **increased** compared to previous years. However, the same amount of allocated national funds is also used for covering childbirth **by women who are out of the mandatory health insurance system**, which requires high costs. Along with the economic crises and the country's 2022 inflation rate of 14.2%, such a low budget for the national preventive health programmes for vulnerable groups can seriously impact the health status of the Roma, particularly of women and children.



[CHAPTER 19]

SOCIAL POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT

In the Screening Report for North Macedonia for Cluster 1 it is noted that *“Regarding Roma, the adoption of the strategy is a positive step to align with the EU Roma framework but the document does not systematically address participation, empowerment, capacity building, fighting digital exclusion and improve mainstreaming of Roma inclusion in the relevant national policies. The pending action plans have not all been adopted yet which hampers implementation. Improvement measures should tackle multiple and structural discrimination, hate crime and hate speech, promoting participation, capacity-building for Roma civil society, mainstreaming Roma equality at regional and local level, as well as use of EU and national funds.... Roma women and girls remain particularly vulnerable, often due to unemployment.”*

Employment

The unemployment among Roma is a constant challenge and was part of many strategic documents in the country; however, no progress has been made in the recent years. 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. Some 25% of the active Roma population works informally. 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.

The Employment Service Agency implements every year the National Employment Operational Plan, but in order to be able to use the measures, one should be registered with the Agency as an unemployed person. Around 23% of the Roma people are not registered with the Employment Service Agency, believing that they cannot benefit from registering. In the past years, HERA designed specific measures for the employment of Roma women according to their characteristics and needs, but as such, they were not included in the National Employment Operational Plan. However, several changes were made as a result of this initiative – Roma population was recognized as a separate group in the employment measures and



a consensus was reached among the institutions that a special approach to Roma community is needed, but they admit that they don't have enough capacities and inter-institutional cooperation for integration on the same. In addition, in certain employment measures, the funds for employers who will employ Roma have increased.

Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA)

The right to Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA) is the most exercised social right by Roma beneficiaries. 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. Also, with the new Law on Social Protection, the cooperation between the employment and social protection services is needed to ensure 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. 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.¹ Different programmes have been implemented through the years, none of them resulting with increase in the employment among Roma women.

The total number of guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in 2023 is 62,460; of which 32,091 (51%) are men, and 30,369 (49%) are women. 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 which is the minimum level of education acquired to be able to use some of the employment measures in the country. A total of 7,863 women and 4,868 men GMA beneficiaries

¹ 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>



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. A total of 11,775 beneficiaries are Roma, or 18.85% of the total number of GMA beneficiaries.

Barriers faced by Roma women and guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries in accessing the labor 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. According to the 2021 report on Macedonia by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 13% of the Roma people have felt discriminated against at work only for being Roma.

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. The guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries face discrimination by the society, including by employers, on account of their poverty and socio-economic status. According to the World Bank's Action Plan for Recovery of Growth and Jobs in North Macedonia, many of the employers fail to perceive these people as a potential, and refuse to include them in training, believing that they have low level of motivation and poor soft skills.

"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

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.

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.

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. 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.

Target group participants in the research 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 target group research participant



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. 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 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.

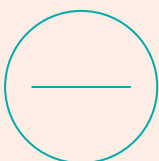
Access to digital devices and the Internet

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. According to MICS 2018 – 2019, 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.



Recommendations:

- Urge the Government to amend and supplement the Law on Social Protection regarding the criteria and the requirements for realising the right to guaranteed minimum assistance
- Call the Government 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
- Urge the Government to introduce a special activation programme for the guaranteed minimum assistance beneficiaries
- To recommend to the Government to adopt local government policies (action plans) for increasing the participation of Roma women in the labour market and allocate municipality budgets for effective implementation



[CHAPTER 28]

CONSUMER AND HEALTH PROTECTION

Abortion care

Abortion requested by a woman on account of social and economic reasons is still not covered by the state health insurance system, including for the poor and socially vulnerable categories. The medical abortion can be performed in only one health facility in the capital city of Skopje. Although the budget allocated to medical abortion under the 2023 Active Health Care Programme for Mothers and Children in the Republic of North Macedonia was increased from 500,000 MKD to 1,500,000 MKD compared to 2022, when an opportunity was given for this budget to be used by other hospitals as well, and not only by a single hospital located in the capital city, as was the case before, due to administrative barriers and the complex procurement procedures, these funds were again given to the same hospital as earlier. The aim was to later distribute these funds to smaller interested hospitals; however, the tender procedure was completed in September, and the medical abortion can still be performed in only one health facility in the capital city of Skopje. This leaves the Roma women in rural areas in an unfavourable position, and the high costs and their remoteness jeopardise the right to safe abortion.

Access to contraception

The Republic of North Macedonia boasts one of the lowest rates of use of modern contraceptives in Europe (14%), which drops to only 8.6% in Roma women in the country. The free contraceptives are only available in the University Clinic for Gynaecology and Obstetrics in the capital city, which makes them inaccessible to Roma women from rural areas. This all results in a lack of proper family planning in the Roma community.



Prenatal care

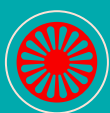
The Government's budget for free folic acid for pregnant women coming from socially disadvantaged groups, including for Roma women, was excluded from the 2022 Preventive Programme for Mothers' and Children's Health and in 2023 the situation remained the same. Progress has been made in the funding for regular gynaecological check-ups, laboratory analysis during pregnancy and childbirth for women who are out of the mandatory health insurance system, which was increased compared to previous years.

The coverage of Roma women with health services during their pregnancy is drastically smaller than the prescribed standards. Almost one-tenth of pregnancies in the Roma community (8.3%) have gone by without a single medical check-up, and 41% of the Roma women had less than eight medical check-ups, which is the recommended number of examinations during pregnancy. Infant mortality was 4.5% on the national level in 2021, with the Roma population being particularly affected, with an 11.8% rate.

Recommendations:

- Urge the Government to ensure affordable medical abortion across the country and cover the costs for the medical and surgical abortion for the poor and socially vulnerable women from the patient's health insurance;
- Call the Government to take urgent and permanent action to ensure full access to health services, especially concerning the sexual and reproductive health of Roma women;
- Urge the Government to increase the state funding for preventive reproductive health services for women with focus on antenatal and postnatal care, particularly for the poor and socially vulnerable communities, such as Roma women.





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