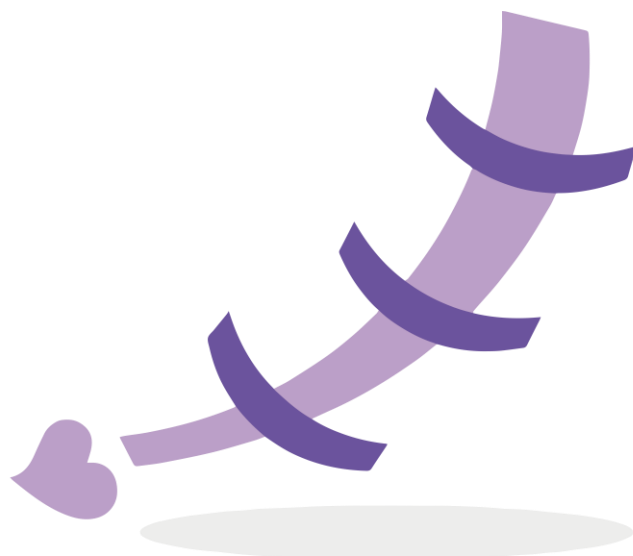




WHEN SCARS BECOME ART

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSION
AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF YOUNG ROMA
AND REFUGEES IN
*North Macedonia***



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Authors:

Urmeta Arifovska

Emilija Panovska

Edis Eminoski

Association:

Regional Roma Educational Youth Association -RROMA

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THEME AND PURPOSE

The Republic of North Macedonia has made progress in social inclusion, yet marginalized youth, particularly the Roma community, continue to face systemic challenges that severely impact their mental health and access to opportunity. This national context is defined by entrenched **Antigypsyism**, which results in unequal access to employment, education, and social resources. The research confirmed this: Roma youth experience **statistically significant and pervasive discrimination**, leading to significantly higher levels of **Anxiety and Depression** compared to Immigrant youth.

The main findings underscore that discrimination functions as a chronic stressor that erodes a young person's sense of social connection, control, and self-worth. The overall purpose of this paper is to translate these critical, evidence-based findings into actionable policy recommendations. The goal is to inform and influence national and local authorities to move beyond policy rhetoric, enact effective legislation, and fund targeted programs that dismantle the structural roots of exclusion and protect the mental well-being and life satisfaction of Roma, migrant, and refugee youth, in line with the objectives of the When Scars Become Art project.

Policy recommendations

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND GOVERNANCE MEASURES

1. Enforce Anti-Discrimination Laws and Acknowledge Antigypsyism: The **Government of North Macedonia** must officially acknowledge Antigypsyism as a fundamental cause of marginalization, and the **Commission for Protection and Prevention of Discrimination (CPPD)** must be mandated to prioritize and publicly report on the stricter enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, particularly concerning housing and employment. This priority action must be visibly implemented within the **next 2 years**.

2. Improve Judicial and Reporting Access: The **Ministry of Justice (MoJ)** and the **CPPD** must collaboratively launch and sustain persistent, multilingual national campaigns to educate young Roma, migrants, and refugees on their legal rights and available reporting mechanisms. This must launch within **1 year** and be sustained for **5 years**.

3. Institutional Capacity Building and Sensitization: The **Agency for Public Sector Employees (APSE)**, in cooperation with the **Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA)** and **MSPDP**, must establish and mandate recurring, specialized sensitization training for all public service workers (police, healthcare, local government) on cultural diversity and implicit bias against vulnerable groups, with full implementation across sectors within **3 years**.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

1. Establish Free and Tailored Mental Health Services: The **Ministry of Health (MoH)**, in collaboration with the Health Insurance Fund, must secure dedicated funding to expand and make free mental health services accessible, ensuring they are trauma-informed and culturally sensitive for marginalized youth. Service points must be operational in the ten largest municipalities within the **next 5 years**.

2. Integrate Mental Health Professionals in Schools: The **Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)** and local municipalities must allocate budget and positions to ensure **every primary and secondary school has a dedicated school psychologist or counselor** trained in detecting and addressing discrimination-related distress with a focus on antigypsyism and providing psychosocial support. This initiative must achieve 100% coverage in the next **5 years**.

3. Fund Resilience and Life Skills Programs: The **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth (MSPDP)** must establish a dedicated and accessible grant line to perpetually support **NGOs and youth centers** in organizing peer mentorship and life skills training—focused on self-confidence and stress management—tailored for Roma and vulnerable youth. This grant mechanism should be launched within 2 years and sustained for **5 years**.

EDUCATION, YOUTH, AND CULTURE

1. Implement Inclusive Roma History and Culture: The **Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)** and the **Bureau for Development of Education** must make it mandatory to integrate **Roma history, culture, and traditions** into all new school curricula to proactively counter ethnic discrimination. Curricular reform development must be phased into schools over the **next 3 years**.

2. Strengthen Youth Representation Mechanisms: **All Local Municipalities (Mayors and Councils)**, under the strong oversight of the **MSPDP**, must be held accountable for establishing all overdue **Local Youth Councils** and **Youth Offices** to fully implement the **Law on Youth Participation** within **2 years**.

3. Institutionalize Experiential Learning: The **National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility (NAEPM)**, in cooperation with the **MoES**, must institutionalize the use of **Erasmus+** and complementary national funding to remove financial barriers and ensure marginalized youth can access these transformative non-formal education opportunities. Full institutionalization and complementary fund allocation must be achieved within **3 years**.

CROSS SECTOR AND COOPERATION MEASURES

1. Establish Mandatory Multi-Sectoral Cooperation: The **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth (MSPDP)**, as the lead coordinator, must formalize and enforce **obligatory, written collaboration protocols** between state institutions (education, health, employment) and the civil sector for seamless, holistic youth support. These protocols must be signed and mechanisms operational within **1 year**.

2. Prioritize Evidence-Based Policy Making: The **Government of North Macedonia**, through the **MSPDP** and the **State Statistical Office (SSO)**, must secure and significantly increase a budget allocation for conducting **longitudinal, evidence-based research** on Roma, migrant, and refugee youth to inform all future policy cycles. The 5-year budget must be secured, and the first major research cycle launched within **1 year**.

EVIDENCE AND SOURCES

These recommendations are grounded in the following supporting evidence:

- **Project Research Data:** The quantitative data show a **statistically significant link** between reported discrimination and **higher levels of anxiety and depression** among respondents, a correlation further exacerbated for the Roma community. The qualitative findings confirm that experiencing discrimination leads to long-lasting **emotional distress, humiliation, and a diminished sense of self-worth** for young Roma.

- **Systemic Exclusion Evidence:** Roma youth perceive themselves as having a **much lower income** compared to the general population, aligning with external data showing the Roma unemployment rate at **67%** and median income at **40-50%** of the national average.
- **Expert and Civil Society Input:** Recommendations were validated and prioritized by an **Expert Panel** including representatives from youth organizations, psychologists, state institutions, and civil society, ensuring they reflect current challenges and viable interventions.
- **Relevant Policy Frameworks:** These recommendations align with and push for the effective implementation of the **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies** and the priorities of the **European Youth Guarantee**.

Dissemination Events

The organization is planning a national-level consultation with the newly formed Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth, followed by a series of local stakeholder meetings in Skopje to promote the adoption of these policy recommendations.

Contact Person:

Urmeta Arifovska - Deputy Director of RROMA

urmeta@romassn.org / +389 78 343 900