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ROMA YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE’S WORKFORCE: DEMOGRAPHIC REALITIES AND LABOUR MARKET EXCLUSION

Zameer Anwar

PhD. Scholar, Centre for Diaspora Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Vadodara

Abstract:

The study aims to analyse how antigypsyism, discrimination and stereotypes have obstructed the realisation of the significant untapped potential of Roma communities in Europe despite its massive burdens on the shrinking working-age population. The inclusion of Roma, a neglected potential, would certainly bring a positive change to Europe’s demand and supply labour markets. The sixty-three per cent Romani people aged between 16 and 24 are unemployed and neither included in education nor in training. 72% of young Romani women are also passive dependents. The paper also examines the socio-economic situations of Roma communities with a focus on inequality of opportunities and economic injustice, and the seclusion of Roma youth in the education and employment sectors. Grounded in the analytical and empirical research based on the surveys, reports, findings of the research studies and scholarly works, carried out by the European Council, United Nations, research institutions and other prestigious organisations, the study explores the barriers to accessing education and discrimination in employment, even though Roma communities are young and vibrant populations.

Keywords: Roma, Roma Communities, Antigypsyism, Roma Youth, Roma Women, Europe, Human Capital, Discrimination against Roma, European Council

Introduction

Roma, the largest ethnic minority of Europe with its sizable population of around 10-12 million¹ (according to the estimate by the European Union, 2025), have been the victim of gross ethnic discrimination, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). They have been stereotyped and prejudiced as being sluggish, detrimental or pernicious to society, filthy, promiscuous, criminal, exotic, strange savages, uncultured, wild, dishonest, sorcerer and so on.

The gruesome history of persecution of Roma in Europe since their arrival in the fifteenth century culminated in the macabre and gruesome measures against them in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, spanning Roma/Gypsy hunts² to the death, the imposition of the death penalty because of being Gypsy/Roma and servitude in galleys or mines. Roma were slaves in different parts of Europe, including the principalities of Wallachia, Moldova and Transylvania from the 14th century until the mid of the 19th Century³.

European rulers unleashed hatred and hostility towards them. From the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, there were outstandingly depressing responses of most of the European powers to the harrowing problems of Gypsies/Roma who were considered criminals or even cannibals because of their grievously deplorable position in societies. Moreover, racial prejudices compounded by religious hostility persisted on account of their so-called pagan practices and sorcery. The authorities were inimical to the masterless community with no fixed abode, and their lives were rendered perilous because

¹ Several advocacy organizations, and non-governmental organizations including Romani and non-Romani contend that the real number of Roma communities are much higher than official census figures.

² William VIII, the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, announced the prize of six reichstaler (currency-coin) for capturing of every Roma/Gypsies alive and half of the prize for the killed one. Roma were hunted by the town people. In Saxony, such hounding was called “Kesseltreiben” and meant for public entertainment.

³ Abolishment of Roma slavery from Moldavia in 1855 by the Civic Divan of Moldavia and emancipation and liberation of Roma slaves owned by boyars in the Romanian Principalities through a decree promulgated by Prince Barbu Dimitrie Stirbei of Wallachia in 1856



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of draconian legislation, a few to mention: Egyptian Act 1530, 1666 Decree and Anti-gypsy law 1749,⁴ dealing with vagabondage, beggary and sedentariness.

Unlike in Europe, Roma/Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire were free in many respects and were not persecuted or afflicted by central or administrative authorities, though they were marginalized and inferior in Ottoman society. Angus Fraser (1992) argued that the condition of Gypsies/Roma in the Ottoman Empire was better than that of their counterparts in Europe and they were independent in conducting their lives. They made their living through agriculture and different crafts. Roma's proficient skill, particularly in metalworking and weaponry, ensured a good place for them in the Ottoman economy. In the mid-19th century, the settled or sedentary Roma had turned out to be the factory proletariat and even the main workforce in the factories in the Balkans.

The persecution and excruciation of Roma persisted over many centuries but reached its crescendo under the Nazi rule that was stirred up by a racial mania. Roma communities between 1933 and 1945 took the brunt of Nazi persecution and genocide. According to Jennifer Putnam (2024) Roma were the worst victims of the holocaust during the Second World War and over half a million of them were massacred along with Jews by the Nazi regime. World War II brought about the most horrendous troubles recorded in the history of the Roma community who suffered the culmination of cruelty, bestiality and inhumanity in the twentieth century. Their situation still remains critical as they continue to face discrimination and unequal access to vital services, especially health care, housing, education and employment.

Europeans were locked in their rigid notion of the world because of their Eurocentric and ethnocentric attitude, and they saw the Romani culture from subjective and biased viewpoints hence, they were not able to acquaint themselves with Romani culture. Their parochial mindset and close-mindedness led them to create a fallacious perception about Roma communities as a whole. Many scholars and researchers in the past underscored the so-called misdeeds of Roma and grounded their allegations in the erroneous cliché of a nomadic way of life and lack of religion, while creating a fabricated, wrong image of the Roma, and a detrimental stereotype that is still prevailing and very active to date. They turned a dignified diaspora into a marginalized social group. It is imperative to sensitize the general masses, besides policymakers and other stakeholders, in order to improve their perception of the Romani people. It is significant to foment interest in the masses in Romani issues. Still, it is observed that it is possible but difficult, because the disparaging feelings of the masses about the Roma, owing to the heritage of slanders and vilification of them.

Europe's Demographic Shifts & Roma Labour Potential

Europe is going through a troubling time of demographic change due to its ageing population, decline in fertility rates, shrinking proportion of the working population, decline in the male population, and restrictive immigrant policies in the wake of far-right nationalism. These slow and structural transformations have long-term effects on the labour market, social welfare, and development of Europe.

The growing ageing and declining youth population is an alarming sign for the sustainable development of the EU. One of the studies, Demography of Europe – 2025 edition, underscores that in the last 20 years (2004-2024), “the proportion of persons aged 80 and over grew in all EU countries. At the EU level, it increased by 2.3 percentage points (pp), from 3.8% to 6.1%. The highest increases were in Greece (+3.2 pp, from 3.8% to 7.0%), Latvia (+3.2 pp, from 2.9% to 6.1%) and Portugal (also +3.2 pp, from 3.8% to 7.0%), and the lowest in Sweden (+0.5 pp, from 5.3% to 5.8%). Over the same period, the share of persons aged 65 and over also increased in all EU countries. At EU level, the increase was 5.2 pp, from 16.4%

⁴ Egyptian Act (HLRO HL/PO/PU/1/1530/22H8n9) 1530, passed by the Parliament of England in 1531, stressed that Gypsies/Roma were viewed with suspicion and hostility. French King Louis XIV (1643-1715) promulgated a decree in 1666, that ordained all Roma males should be forcibly sent to the galleys for life without trial and Romani women should be sterilized. Anti-gypsy law (1749), enacted by Maria Theresa, ordered the forced removal of gypsies, beggars, nomads, and vagrants out of the Austrian Empire.



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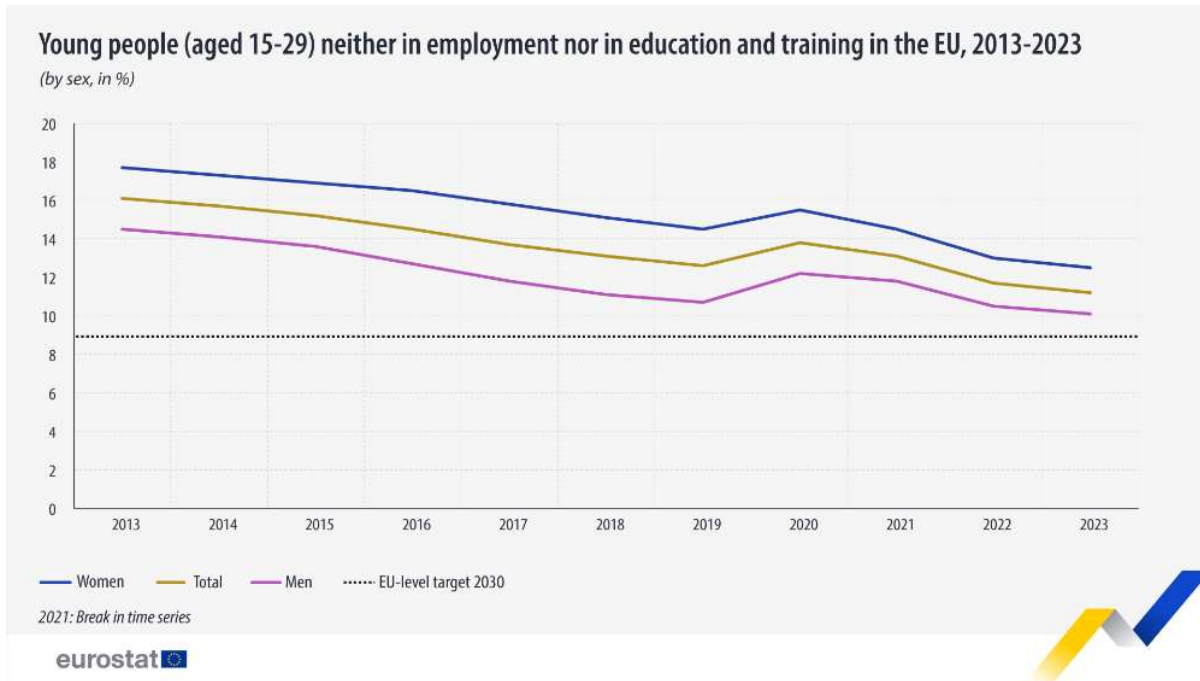


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to 21.6%.” (Eurostat, 2025). On the contrary the youth population (those aged below 15) is decreasing from 16.2% to 14.6% between 2004 and 2024. “the proportion of children and young adolescents (under the age of 15) declined in the EU by 1.6 pp, dropping from 16.2% to 14.6%. A decrease was observed in almost all EU countries, with the highest decreases in Malta (-5.9 pp) and Cyprus (-5.1 pp). Only Czechia (+0.6 pp), Estonia and Latvia (both +0.2 pp), Slovenia and Bulgaria (both +0.1 pp) recorded increases. On 1 January 2024, the share of children and young adolescents was highest in Ireland (18.9%) and lowest in Italy (12.2%). Over the same period, the share of young people (under the age of 19) decreased in all EU countries. At EU level, the decrease was 2.4 pp, from 22.4% to 20.0%” (Eurostat, 2025).

Despite these ongoing crises in demography, the youth population of the EU in general is underutilised and the Roma youth population in particular. In 2023, more than one in ten (11.2%) young people aged 15 to 29 in the EU were neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET), a decrease of 0.5 percentage points (pp) compared with 2022. Over the last ten years, there has been a noticeable decrease in the NEET rate among people aged 15 to 29. In 2013, the EU rate stood at 16.1%, and it has decreased steadily since then, with the only exception being the COVID-affected 2020 when an increase was reported (from 12.6% in 2019 to 13.8% in 2020, followed by 13.1% in 2021).



Source: Eurostat: dataset: edat_lfse_20

The condition of the Roma youth is more precarious as they are structurally discriminated and excluded because of the ‘otherness’ attached to their identity through the lines of ethnicity and race.

Socio-Economic Conditions of Roma Communities in the EU

Myriads of underlying reasons have kept Roma at a higher risk of impoverishment and marginalization. On almost every indicator of human development, in every European country, the Roma lag far behind the national average. According to the Roma survey 2021, more than 80 per cent of Roma have been living below abysmal poverty throughout Europe. On average, 83 per cent of Romani children younger than 18 dwell in households at risk of poverty, and 45 per cent of the Romani population have been living in severe material deprivation. 61 per cent of Roma are scarcely or with great difficulty



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able to make their ends meet. By and large, 43 per cent of Roma aged between 20 and 64 are in paid work, including full-time, part-time, ad hoc jobs, occasional work and self-employment.

EU-MIDIS II (2016) reports that only one in four Roma aged 16 years or older is either employed or self-employed: in comparison to the employment rate of Romani men, with 34%, and the employment rate of Romani women is pegged at 16%. The survey further demonstrates the overall paid-work rates of Roma communities aged 20-64 years to be 43%. That is quite below the EU average of 70 % in 2015. It is imperative to mention the disadvantages pertaining to the higher unemployment and inactivity of the most active working-age group (30-54 years) among Roma communities. It is visible that the employment situation of Romani young people is exacerbated, as on average, 63% of Roma aged between 16 and 24 are inactive, neither in employment nor in education nor in any vocational or professional training. 72% of young Roma women are not employed, neither in education nor in training, as compared with 55 % of young Roma men.

56% Roma do not have a bank account. They lack access to credit or loans due to the ambiguous property ownership, as they generally reside in settlements and in remote areas, so they lack the required documents to claim credit assistance. Therefore, they are not in a position to embark upon their own business or venture. Even now, Roma are subjected to discrimination, racism, forced eviction, police brutality as well as faced with the lower literacy rates, dilapidated housing, meager incomes, poorer health, and higher level of unemployment than the rest of the population.

The life expectancy of the Roma is 10-15 years lower than that of their fellow Eastern European citizens; Romani women, on average, live 11 years less than women in the general population, whereas men live 9.1 years less than those in the majority population. The estimated disadvantage in the life expectancy of the Roma community is 15 years less across Europe. EU FRA (Roma Survey 2024) notes that every second Roma/Traveller (47%) lives in a state of housing deprivation, and they live in damp, dark dwellings or houses without proper sanitation facilities. It also points out that four out of five Roma/Travelers (83%) live in a household that does not have enough rooms, thus is overcrowded.

Discrimination in Different Forms Against Roma Communities

Roma have been regarded as social outcasts - the people of foreign customs, language, and appearance by Europeans for centuries. Hence, discrimination and prejudices against Roma have been rooted in European societies. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)'s Roma Survey in 2024, over 31% of the respondents to the survey said that they felt discriminated against owing to their ethnic origin. European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey 2 (EU MIDIS-2018) reports, 30% of Roma interviewed have experienced hate-motivated harassment, and points out that Roma continue to face intolerable levels of discrimination in daily life – whether looking for work, at work, in education, healthcare, housing or when in contact with administrative bodies or offices and private services such as entering a shop, restaurant, bar, night club, hotel or public transport. Almost one in two Roma (41%) felt discriminated against because of their ethnicity at least once in one of these areas of daily life in the past five years. One in four Roma (26 %) indicates that the last incident of perceived discrimination occurred in the 12 months preceding the survey. The highest prevalence of discrimination in the past 12 months is found when using public or private services (19%) and when looking for work (16%). However, on average, only 12% of Roma report their experiences of discrimination to an authority. Moreover, almost a third (27%) of the Roma surveyed do not know of any law, prohibiting discrimination based on ethnic origin, and most Roma (82%) do not know any organizations, offering support to victims of discrimination.

Many Roma have said that they have experienced unequal treatment when looking for work in the last five years. In Spain, Romania and Portugal 38 %–40 % of Roma stated that they experienced such discrimination. In Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic, the figures are between 66 % and 74 %. Many also pointed out that they suffered such discriminatory treatment at work, for example, in the Czech Republic (41 %) and in Greece (33 %).



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These factors engender the poor educational outcomes, entailing the higher illiteracy, inflated drop-out, erratic school attendance, and lower educational attainment, an impediment to access to further and higher education and professional training. At present, just 27 per cent of Roma aged between 20 and 24 years have attained the upper secondary education across all European Union countries. Over 70 per cent of young Roma leave school at the earliest, and 71 per cent of Roma aged between 18 and 24 years do not get to the upper secondary level. One out of five Romani children experiences hate-motivated harassment and bullying while in school. 44% Romani children in Greece have never gone to school, 32% Romani children in Portugal, 24% in Romania, 24% in France, 21% in Italy and 17% in Spain have never attended school (FRA EU Roma Survey 2021).

It is readily apparent that Romani youths more often undergo oppression and seclusion in educational spaces because of the stereotypes that young Roma are less intelligent. Such perceptions are affecting Roma's education experiences, including their motivation to engage in learning. As a result, the higher drop-out rate in schools among Roma children and their participation beyond primary school is outstandingly lower than that of the majority population. Romani youth expresses a fervent desire to achieve academic excellence if they receive support for the development, care, respect and kindness.

Roma: A Saviour of the European Economy

The future of European economies is projected to be precarious because of ageing populations, lower birth rates and other negative demographic trends. The proportion of people of working age in the European Union (EU) is shrinking, while the number of older people is going up; such developments are likely to have profound implications not only for individuals but also for governments and business, hence the economy. The ageing population (defined as aged 65 years or more) in the European Union (28 countries) is estimated to be about 150 million by 2050. An aggregate of about 50 million fewer people of working age in Europe is reckoned by 2035.

However, the Roma remain the youngest, most vibrant, and fastest growing section of Europe's population. In every country of Europe, Romani people constitute a large chunk of the working-age population, as there is immense growth in the Roma population, whereas an outstanding decline in the fertility of the majority population. The young population of Roma between 0 and 24 years old in Spain constitutes 48.8% and the average age of Roma is 28.1% compared to that of the general population is 41.3%. Roma under 30 years in North Macedonia is approximately double of the majority population. In Romania, 59.9% of Roma are under 30 years of age, whereas the majority population is just 32.8%. According to the report-2019 of the Council of Europe, Roma communities grow younger (25.1 years old) than the EU population average (40.2 years old). Contrary to the region's ageing population, the demographic potential of the Roma is tremendous and, in many cases, they are primed to plug the holes coming down the road.

Europe is faced with striking challenges for keeping up its economy and expanding the workforce before long, owing to a declining labour force and the retiring population, thus drawing on their pensions. In order to cope with these challenges, the European Union announced 2023 as the European Year of Skills to give impetus to notch up EU 2030 social targets of a minimum 60 per cent of adults, undergoing training every year and at least 78 per cent in employment. European Year of Skills 2023 was seen as a potential opportunity for Roma Communities to improve their situation in the labour markets, with a focus on meeting their aspirations and skills demanded in the markets. However, the reports suggest otherwise, while the individual measures of some countries and EU-funded projects have indeed benefited Roma, endeavours to bridge the gap between Roma and non-Roma in labour markets and other fields have achieved limited success over the years, and progress has been creeping.

The Roma community will be a saviour for the European economy on condition that imperative priorities are given to comprehend the nature and cause of the Roma's backwardness and poverty, and to make policy intervention with an efficacious and fair implementation system. Though the European Commission, since the mid-1990s, has taken various measures to ameliorate the living conditions and inclusion of the Roma community in mainstream societies. The milestone initiative was taken in 2011 by the European Union with the adoption of an EU framework for national Roma integration



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strategies up to 2020. This aimed at addressing and tackling the socio-economic exclusion of and discrimination against Roma by promoting equal access in four main areas: education, employment, health, and housing.

In October 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on fighting anti-gypsyism and accentuated the protection of fundamental rights in the process of Roma integration. In October 2020, the European Commission adopted a new 10-year plan with the focus on equality, inclusion and participation, besides education, health, housing and employment up to 2030. However, this framework instrument is non-binding but a soft policy tool that offers a reference point to the member states for the coordination, consultation, monitoring and recommendations for national Roma integration strategies. The European Parliament noted that the overall situation of the Roma people in the European Union had not improved and their condition continues to be extremely worrying.

Roma have been braving the formidable barriers to education, coupled with persistent discrimination, racism, poverty, restraint on employment and absence of social protection. The poor educational outcomes, combined with persistent discrimination and injustice, perpetuate a cycle of educational disadvantage that further marginalizes Roma communities and prevents social mobility. Prejudice, oppression and ethnic segregation are key factors, dwindling their potential, confidence and capacities to represent their interests, assert their identity in public places, safeguard themselves against inequality and violence, and emancipate themselves from backwardness, exploitation, and cultural domination so that the proficiency of Roma can be tapped into the uncertain labour markets of Europe.

Julius Rostas (2019) rightly suggested the failure of policies related to the Roma community owing to the non-participation of Romani groups in policy-making and which excluded them from expressing their preferences, interests, and prevented them from negotiating their priorities. His further argument focused on the failure of the policies since it failed to ameliorate the situation of Roma, including not only their living standard but also their position in the societies in which they live. The exclusion of Roma from knowledge production is a highly oppressive practice, faced by the Roma communities today, which has serious consequences in policy design. Besides, it enables others to describe their identity and determine their fate and aspirations, as well as rationalize and multiply oppressive practices by the mechanism of social control.

The bright future of Roma communities overwhelmingly counts on arrangements for the schooling of their children, as education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity and a key to a better future, besides being the most effective weapon to understand modern reality. Therefore, the educational policies for Roma are meant not only to increase the number of students and to reduce the drop-out, but also to make Romani youth confident to affirm their ethnic affiliations in a place where it matters. It is true that educational policies of some European countries have led to the rise in the number of Roma graduates and university students, however failed to boost the confidence of Roma, thus policies courted a negative response and were regarded as assimilationist and a threat to Roma communities.

It is commonplace that a disproportionately large number of disadvantaged Roma throughout Europe have been facing considerable hardships in education, employment, health care, and housing which are interlinked and affecting one another. If Roma don't attain adequate education, will not get formal and better employment. If Roma children are in poor health, it will impact their capability to learn and their overall growth. The deplorable housing condition can cause an unhealthy environment, leading to disruption in learning, labor productivity and poor health. Insufficient income consequently can preclude them from affording proper housing, from availing preventive health care, and from providing a conducive environment for their children to study. The upliftment of social, economic and political situations of Roma communities in Europe is something indispensable and coupled to each country's holistic economic and social development. Policymakers should make targeted interventions rather than employing sector-wise policies so that Roma can make full participation in the labour market and public services.



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Key Findings and Conclusion:

- Despite policy commitments such as The Strasbourg Declaration on Roma 2010, European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies 2011, European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 and EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030⁵ to abolishing discrimination and anti-gypsyism, many member-states and countries fail to implement and ensure sustainable and long-term solutions.
- There are formidable disparities in healthcare, housing conditions, and employment opportunities for Roma communities, further worsening the cycle of disadvantages.
- Roma communities lag far behind on every indicator of the Human Development Index in spite of several initiatives and policies proposed by the European Union.
- Poverty is the chief factor badly impacting Roma followed by social exclusion and limited access to education.
- The young population of Roma can fulfil the labour demands of the various sectors and markets, if provided with vocational education and training and sector-specific skills.
- The potential and skills of Roma communities serve as a catalyst for bridging the gap in the labour markets, if skill challenges are properly addressed.

It is of utmost importance to manifest the economic contribution of Roma to societies, as their significant economic contributions have been cornered and underrated for a long time, in order to combat the stereotypes or false image of Roma as lazy and work-shy people, prevailing throughout Europe and the Americas. Such a usual prejudice is indeed egregious. It is to promote realistic views about the Roma who should be presented as partners in European societies. Given to the fact that the integration of Roma will not serve the purpose of shifting the Roma communities from the margin to the mainstream as the integration is a codeword or a euphemism for the blatant racism that restrains and obstructs the path for them to live together, eat together, worship together, celebrate together, commemorate together, speak their own language together and practice their tradition and culture together. Consequently, they indeed end up becoming more isolated and alienated, so the European Council and other policymakers should focus on the upliftment of their socio-economic and political condition rather than the integration of the Roma community. Roma communities can suffice labor needs and accelerate the economy through entering the workforce if hindrances such as lower literacy and higher unemployment are properly addressed.

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⁵ The Declaration was adopted in 2010 and provided for ambitious plan of action to national, regional and local authorities for ameliorating social and economic situation of Roma and travellers. The 2011 Framework outlines an effective approach to address problems of social and economic exclusion of Roma living in Europe and promotes the inclusion of communities. National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 aimed at dealing with Socio-Economic exclusion of Roma with focus on ensuring equal access to education, employment, health and housing. A new 10-year plan aims at supporting Roma with focus on seven key areas like equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health, and housing.



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