Prevention Before Removal: Roma Children, Child Poverty and the Risk of Family Separation

On 19 November in Brussels, the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network held its annual Policy Conference, *Implementing the EU Roma Strategic Framework: Roma child poverty and the prevention of family separation*. Make Mothers Matter was invited to speak on the first panel, which launched ERGO's new research report on Roma children. The report shows how family poverty is so often misinterpreted as neglect, and how this results in families being broken apart.

One quote from the report stayed with us: *"When parents provide care, affection, and protection, but they lack adequate income, good housing, or administrative support, the correct public response should be family support, not removal."* It comes from a Roma activist in Spain, but it could have come from any of the mothers' organisations we work with across Europe.

What the evidence shows

The ERGO Network report covers Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, and its picture is consistent. Roma communities are much younger than the majority population, so children make up a large share of them, and most of those children grow up in poverty. The Fundamental Rights Agency estimates that 77% of Roma children in the EU are at risk of poverty. In marginalised communities in Slovakia the figure is 91%, and in Spain it is close to 90%.

Behind these figures are overcrowded rooms, damp walls and no quiet corner to do homework. In Slovakia, nine children died in fires in Roma settlements in a single year.

The report's central finding is that poverty and marginalisation are too often read as parental failure, which is how families end up exposed to unnecessary separation.

Seeing it from where mothers stand

A Roma mother with several children often carries everything at once: irregular income, a benefit application that needs one more document, three children registered with three different paediatricians. With no childcare, she brings them all to every appointment. In one Czech case, a mother's benefit claim was rejected over a single missing occupancy document, and she had to start again. Then a missed check-up or a school absence is read as negligence.

Our own research points the same way. Our 2024 survey of 9,600 mothers in eleven Member States found that 67% feel overloaded, handling up to 70% of household and care tasks, and 41% feel their role is not recognised by society. If that is the reality for mothers in general, imagine mothers who also face poverty, housing exclusion and racism.

Fear plays a part too. Many families do not take up the benefits and services they need, partly because information is hard to access, but also because of shame and a sense of failure. Mothers feel they are begging, and they fear being judged. The report documents a mother in Czechia who avoided the NGO workers visiting her hostel because she feared being seen as incapable and losing her children. A mother who is afraid to ask for help is a policy failure. Systems that threaten removal when she asks for support defeat their own purpose.

Maternal health shows the same pattern. Roma women report discrimination and disrespect when seeking care, are confined to Roma wards, and in parts of Europe are denied services altogether.

A double standard

The report also names a double standard. When Roma families are poor, they are scrutinised: the damp flat, the missed appointment and the empty fridge are read as proof of bad parenting. Yet when a Roma child is genuinely at risk, services can underreact, because poor conditions and even harm are sometimes seen as "somehow normal in Roma communities." It is the same stereotype working in opposite directions. Families are punished for poverty, while children are left unprotected from real danger.

Child protection matters, and children must be safe. But children's rights cannot be realised apart from their families. There are no poor children in rich families.

What needs to happen

- **Adequate income and secure housing.** Material conditions should never be grounds for removal.
- **Simple, human access to support.** One-stop shops and trusted mediators work. Bulgaria's "one family, one plan, one coordinator" model means a mother deals with one person rather than five offices. Yet too many Roma health, school and community mediators depend on short-term project funding.
- **Early, home-based support from pregnancy onwards.** Home visits improve children's development and reduce maternal anxiety and depression. In Czechia, one field worker may cover around 15 families, which cannot work.
- **Accessible childcare and family-centred choices.** Affordability, distance and discrimination still keep Roma children out, even though they are named among the groups the Barcelona targets[1] should reach.
- **Respectful, culturally appropriate care**, including mental health support, and mandatory anti-bias training for professionals in health, education, social work and child protection.
- **Family-based alternatives and reunification support** where separation does happen, because the goal remains for families to stay together.
- **Participation** of Roma mothers, children and organisations in designing and monitoring all of this.

What EU policy can do

The EU has the right instruments: the Roma Strategic Framework, the Child Guarantee, Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the Council Recommendation on minimum income. The report's verdict, however, is that implementation is the weak point in all six countries. Funding is unstable, projects are short-lived and Roma-specific data is missing. The Commission's own 2026 review finds delivery for Roma children uneven and insufficient.

We therefore call on the EU to:

1. Issue a strong Guidance Note on Roma and other children in vulnerable situations under the strengthened Child Guarantee, naming prevention of family separation explicitly.
2. Link the Roma Framework, the Child Guarantee and the new Anti-Poverty Strategy through a life-cycle approach that starts in early childhood and supports parents, not only children.

[1] European Union benchmarks for early childhood education and care (ECEC) designed to expand childcare access, support working parents, and boost female labor participation

3. Ensure structured participation of Roma and other mothers in vulnerable situations, children and civil society, beyond one-off consultations.
4. Safeguard funding for social inclusion and child poverty in the 2028–2034 budget.

The last point is decisive. Mediators, outreach teams, family support and housing measures rely heavily on EU funds. If child poverty is no longer ring-fenced, it will compete with defence and competitiveness, and the children in the poorest settlements, with the least political voice, will lose. Member States should allocate at least 5% of ESF+ to combating child and family poverty, and at least 10% where child poverty and social exclusion exceed the EU average. They should also make Roma and other families experiencing poverty, inclusion and prevention of family separation visible priorities in every national plan, give mothers' organisations and civil society a seat at the table when plans are negotiated, and fund mediators and community services on a multi-year basis rather than through another three-year project cycle.

Support, not removal

Roma mothers want what every mother wants: to keep their children safe, fed, schooled and by their side. The report shows that structural exclusion in housing, employment, healthcare and education sets standards of "good parenting" that are impossible to meet, and then punishes mothers for failing them.

We need the political will to fund support for families, not the removal of children. As a local NGO representative in Romania put it in the report: *"Prevention should always come before removal."*