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Public statement raising awareness on impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the Roma communities in the UK

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This statement is reflecting the concerns of the Roma communities in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are approximately 200,000 migrant Roma living in the UK¹.

Counting between 10 to 12 million the Roma is the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Roma communities in the UK consist of various groups of Roma that have moved and settled in the UK from countries such as Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania.

A long history of discrimination, including 500 years of slavery in Eastern Europe, has resulted in many inequalities that Roma communities face today, which make them particularly vulnerable in the context of COVID-19.

These vulnerabilities are influenced by the following:

A. HEALTH: Roma have 7-20 years lower life expectancy

Across Europe **the health situation of the Roma** communities is strongly connected with the high levels of poverty the Roma still experience. In 2016 the Fundamental Right Agency (FRA) identified that 80% of Roma are at risk of poverty². The Roma population across Europe has a considerably shorter life expectancy compared to the non-Roma population. Across European Union countries, data **on life expectancy for the Roma** population indicates estimates ranging from **7-20 fewer years of life**³. Roma in the older age groups (65+) report a much steeper increase in chronic disease related problems (70% compared to 56% for non-Roma)⁴. The majority of adult Roma population in the UK share the same health issues as Roma in their countries of origin.

B. HOUSING: Roma victims of rogue landlords and not aware of statutory rights

The situation looks no different in regards to **accommodation facilities**. The same FRA report identified 30% of Roma households across Europe having no access to tap

¹ https://www.salford.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1155666/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf

² <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2016/80-roma-are-risk-poverty-new-survey-finds>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/social_determinants/docs/2014_roma_health_report_es_en.pdf

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/social_determinants/docs/2014_roma_health_report_es_en.pdf

water and 46% having no indoor toilet, shower or bathroom. Most **Roma in the UK** live in poor areas and the majority are renting in the private sector. Many are **renting from unscrupulous or rogue landlords and the majority of Roma are not aware of their statutory rights.**⁵ Many Roma live in shared houses with no security over their accommodations. At the same time, Roma families are usually larger in numbers compared with other communities and include grandparents. This means the risk of spreading and increasing the numbers of those requiring NHS support is much higher compared with other communities.

C. ROUGH SLEEPING: 7% if all rough sleepers in London are recorded as GRT

At the same time there are significant numbers of **Roma sleeping rough** in UK's major cities. The CHAIN 2018/2019 – Greater London, report⁶ recorded a total of 8,855 rough sleepers. Out of these, 7% were recorded as Gypsy/Roma/Travellers. Language barriers and lack of trust in services are making it difficult for them to engage with services. Roma community representatives must be resourced to engage effectively with the rough sleeping Roma.

D. EMPLOYEMENT: Roma not aware of their rights and have difficulties accessing available support

Many Roma work in unskilled roles and in the sectors where jobs and income security are weakest. This includes factory work, construction work and cleaning jobs. They are often on zero hours contracts or self-employed. Some are working in precarious conditions with no contracts and are paid via cash in hand. Many Roma, especially those living in big cities, are Big Issue vendors. Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, all of them have now lost their income⁷. We are concerned many Roma will not be supported by their employers to access government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. At the same time government has announced that all eligible self-employed will be contacted in order to access financial support made available for them. We have great concerns regarding communication between the Roma and HMRC. With no support in place the majority of Roma will not be able to follow the instructions given in the letters or forms received.

E. EDUCATION: Roma can't access information and children are missing education

Being able to follow current government guidance and accessing all support available is vital during such times. Most Roma in the EU have received **limited education**. This situation is not dissimilar in the UK with regard to the adult Roma population. There is very limited knowledge of English amongst Roma communities in the UK and Roma find it very difficult to seek information using online platforms.

⁵ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/NRIS-CSMR.pdf>

⁶ https://airdrive-secure.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/london/dataset/chain-reports/2019-06-19T08%3A14%3A39/Greater%20London%20full%202018-19.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIAJJDIMAIVZJDICKHA%2F20200406%2Feu-west-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20200406T152220Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-Signature=58b405cabd046e46a801f2401ce96b91a3706e0804db6d5b1f2961a2ae6c3388&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host

⁷ <https://www.bigissue.com/support-the-big-issue/>

So far, the government has failed to ensure the COVID-19 guidance is accessible and clear to everyone living in the UK. Many Roma are getting COVID-19 related information from the news from their country of origin, which might be different compared to the UK.

The same applies to the lockdown guidance. This puts Roma communities at high risk. We have already seen media sharing stories of Roma not abiding the lockdown guidance. These stories attract a negative reaction from the wider public and are fuelling the negative stereotypes regarding the community.

Given the COVID-19 context the education of Roma children in the UK is at risk. Currently Roma children are struggling to access online education resources for 2 main reasons: a) digital exclusion – many Roma children do not have equipment required to access online facilities; b) with many parents having limited education, the Roma children will have difficulties being educated at home.

Clear and accessible information must be made available for those with low or no literacy and for those with low levels of English. The same principle must be applied when providing information on accessing COVID-19 financial support. In this case, considering the very limited IT and digital skills, support should be in place for everyone to be able to access the information. This will enable people to pay for their rent and prevent abuse from landlords or other parties.

Immediate steps should be made in order to address all concerns in order to:

- Prevent deaths among those from the Roma community.
- Ensure Roma have access to information;
- Prevent tension arising between Roma and local residents;
- Ensure appropriate support to enable efficient home education for Roma children

This statement is supported by:
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