

BARRIERS

URBAN POPULATION

In view of the education, social status and availability of options, it is expected that the urban population would play a more active part in the civic and political developments in the country. Yet, the research shows that their interests and motivation to participate does not differ from those of the general and the rural population.

Almost half of the population is not interested in the socio-political development of the country, face the same barriers as the other groups and are reluctant to engage with the institutions.

- ♦ Scepticism about their power to influence politics and policies in the country.
- ♦ Lack of information on participation channels.
- ♦ Lack of civic and political skills.
- ♦ Fear of pressure and consequences.
- ♦ Poor previous experience with the institutions undermines their motivation for social and civic participation resulting with active citizens soon become disappointed with the results.
- ♦ Widespread politicisation of the society.

RURAL POPULATION

Comprising a significant share of the overall population in the country (42%, World Bank), the civic and political participation of the rural population is very important. Their disengagement from civic and political life tends to increase their perception of being marginalized and not represented.

Compared to the general population, there is no difference in the level of interest for the socio-political development of the country as well as in the level of their involvement. The polled differences in the interest and participation levels are mostly contingent upon factors such as age, gender, and educational level rather than on location. This is subject to further analysis and recommendations in the report (under the profiles of rural women and rural youth).

However, some particularities persist in terms of attitudes and beliefs of this demographic group.

Although they share the same concerns with regards to: healthcare, socio-economic prosperity, and environment, this group is more concerned about the perceived influence of politics on the personal economic prosperity (employment, nepotism, etc.), quality of life and migration of young people.

Most significant barriers specific to this group are:

- ♦ **Underrepresentation:** strong feeling that their concerns are not addressed by their representatives, accentuated by the feeling of marginalization which reflects negatively on their active participation
- ♦ **Low interest in civic participation** due to disbelief in the genuine interest of politicians in the rural communities
- ♦ **Scepticism** about their power to influence politics and policies in the country
- ♦ **Lack of channels and avenues** for participation and sharing of ideas
- ♦ **Issues with personal identification documents** which reflect during elections/voting
- ♦ **Fear of retaliation** against social activism and criticism

YOUTH

It is vitally important and challenging to ensure that the next generations participate in democracy. It requires commitment from governments, political parties, candidates, non-governmental organizations, and democratic citizens and groups. Indeed, numerous stakeholders play a critical role in creating conditions for increased and more equitable civic and political participation of the youth.

The research identifies the following barriers to more active civic and political participation:

Scepticism about their power to influence: Young people do not believe they can influence policies in the country.

Underrepresentation: Young people do not feel they are sufficiently represented and/or involved in addressing issues of concern in decision-making processes.

Lack of knowledge and skills to confidently participate in the civic and political life

Lack of channels for participation and expression of opinions

FIRST TIME VOTERS

In view of their lack of previous experience in civic and political life, first time voters tend to demonstrate lower interest and willingness to participate in elections and activism compared to the youth in general. The barriers identified among the youth category in general (lack of knowledge, doubts in their impact, underrepresentation, availability of communication channels) are more pronounced among first time voters.

Specific barriers for this group are following:

- Poor knowledge and awareness about the overall voting process and specific election stages (voter list scrutiny, registration, etc.).
- Need for empowerment and buildup of skills and knowledge to navigate civic life more confidently.

RURAL YOUTH

Compared to the youth in general, rural youth are more willing to actively participate in civic and political life. As a group, they are more interested in socio-political developments and have a good understanding of the election process and its importance.

The political participation of every underrepresented or politically marginalized group or lack thereof is very important. Some of the barriers identified by youth in general - doubts about their impact, youth underrepresentation, availability of channels to express their needs and concerns - are more pronounced by this group. Similarly to the general youth group, rural youth voters should be further motivated to engage in civic and political activities.

- ♦ **Stronger feeling of underrepresentation:** Rural youth feel that their concerns are not addressed by their representatives, and no elected officials from this demographic group hold office
- ♦ **Disbelief in their power** to influence issues and policies of their concern
- ♦ **Lack of communication** with officials, candidates, and non-government organizations
- ♦ **Belief in general politicization** of the society and reduced focus on policies and issues of concern for the citizens

WOMEN

Unequal political and civic participation and representation in political life is the key challenge of every democratic society, including North Macedonia. Gender inequality is the underlying reason for the significantly lower participation of women in socio-political life compared to men. Despite the formal recognition of equal political rights of women and men, the socio-political participation (political party membership and participation, standing for office, being elected and holding office within legislative or administrative bodies) remains dominated by men. The development of the society is contingent upon the fully fledged acknowledgment of the experiences, skills, and concerns of women and their full participation and representation in the legislative decision making.

The research has identified key factors and barriers that influence women's civic and political participation. Barriers are related to socio-economic factors, capacity, and cultural influence.

Patriarchal value system defining the place (at home) and the role (mother, sister, wife) of women in the society.

Related to the above, perceived lack of time due to the women's role as primary care provider in the family and household workload

Difficulty to relate with political topics and issues, especially those that do not affect them directly.

Lack of knowledge about different forms of civic and political participation: available opportunities for participation, benefits from participation, etc., especially among women with lower education and socio-economic status.

Scepticism about their power to influence politics in the country and to improve the quality of life.

Feeling of not being taken seriously and belief that initiatives raised by women are less effective compared to male or mixed-gender initiatives.

Lack of skills and knowledge to confidently participate, particularly in the political life due to historically rooted perception that men are suited for political life while women for reproductive and family-related caregiving roles.

RURAL WOMEN

The barriers identified in the women general group are significantly intensified among rural woman. The most prominent among these are the patriarchal value system, lack of time and focus on home and family, and scepticism about their power to influence.

Obstacles specific to rural woman that were not emphasized by women in general include:

- ♦ Lower awareness about the importance of civic and political participation of women
- ♦ Strong feeling of discrimination on the grounds of age, appearance, etc.
- ♦ Enhanced lack of self-confidence and competence
- ♦ Poor networking, support systems, and teamwork
- ♦ Poor transport infrastructure and connections to enable their participation
- ♦ Enhanced pressure by political parties and candidates during election period

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities have the right to participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, but there continue to be significant barriers to inclusion of this community.

A set of actions should be undertaken to empower persons with disabilities to equally participate in the socio-political life of the country.

In addition to the barriers identified by the general population, persons with disabilities face:

Physical barriers to political and civic participation and to exercise their rights (limited accessibility to voting places, institutions, etc.).

Physical barriers in everyday life, such as access to public transport or adapted vehicles, which also impacts participation, particularly for the rural population.

Communication barriers - communication not tailored to their specific needs, as recipients of information but also as participants in debates or as guests in programs.

Attitude barriers - they are not perceived as persons with abilities, capacity and potential to contribute to the civic and political life.

The feeling of underrepresentation of their specific needs.

ROMA

The Roma population is faced with various social, political, and economic challenges that curtail their full integration and active participation in the society and the public life. Roma political and public marginalization is caused by many factors such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, substandard living conditions, language barriers, poor infrastructure, lack of resources, etc. a number of structural and social barriers are identified in this research:

The political participation of every underrepresented or politically marginalized group (or lack thereof) is very important and should be addressed accordingly. Currently Roma are one of the most politically marginalized ethnic groups in North Macedonia.

Lack of knowledge and information to navigate the election process related to voter registration, voter list scrutiny, or reporting irregularities and manipulations

Lack of personal identification documents due to which Roma citizens are not included in the voter list

Insufficient understanding of political and electoral processes thereby limiting the interest in politics and political participation of Roma citizens with lower social status and/or educational background

Low level of involvement due to preoccupation with existential issues

Difficulties relating to abstract political and civic topics seemingly irrelevant to everyday life

Scepticism about their power to influence politics and policies in the country

Underrepresentation in state administration and perception that their concerns are not addressed by those who represent them

Lack of skills to confidently participate in political and civic life and lack of awareness of the need to participate. These are also influenced by existing divisions, lack of unity and structure among Roma political activists and within the community

Limited access to information and education due to limited resources: finances, time, living standard as well as skills such as literacy, digital literacy, etc.

REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Population from remote communities acts similarly to the rural population in terms of attitudes and behaviour toward civic and political participation. The general feeling of marginalisation and lack of representation is more pronounced among this group. They are concerned that even the basic requirements, such as transport and infrastructure, health care, drinking water supply and others are not met and that they do not appear on the political parties' agenda.

In terms of interest, compared to the general population, people living in remote communities tend to be more interested in socio-political developments and more often discuss these issues with other people.

The following specific barriers were identified:

- ♦ Lack of interest among institutions and politicians for improvement of the quality of life and harnessing a feeling of marginalization and exclusion.
- ♦ Underrepresentation: a strong feeling that their concerns are not addressed by those who represent them.
- ♦ Scepticism about their power to influence politics and policies in the country.
- ♦ Low self-initiative despite the well-recognized need for civic participation.
- ♦ Lack of opportunities and channels where they can participate and be civically engaged and low awareness thereof.
- ♦ Lack of skills to actively participate (preference for passive participation).
- ♦ Poor infrastructure (road infrastructure and connections) affect negatively their participation.

VERY POOR

Poverty is the strongest barrier for socio-political participation. However, it is necessary to further identify the barriers that inhibit poor people's activation, such as their perceptions, experience or attitudes.

They demonstrate a low level of interest in socio-economic developments in the country and a lower motivation to participate in civic and political activities. The barriers leading to this situation can be described as follows:

- ♦ **Previous negative experiences** with political parties, candidates (manipulation, marginalization, lies, unfulfilled promises).
- ♦ **Focus on existential concerns and survival** - time and energy are spent on addressing basic existential problems.
- ♦ **Disbelief** in the interest of the public institutions to improve their quality of life.
- ♦ **Scepticism** of their power to influence.
- ♦ **Fear of pressure and consequences** - they believe that their survival and access to income, services or benefits depend on the relations with officials, and if challenged, they could lose what they already have.
- ♦ **Lack of skills & knowledge** how and where to participate.
- ♦ **Lack of knowledge about forms and means of engagement and participation** in socio-political life, especially knowledge about civic rights and how to protect and exercise the civic rights.

CHRONICALLY UNEMPLOYED

The chronically unemployed group is very similar to the group of very poor in terms of interest and behaviour towards socio-political participation.

Similarly to the other polled groups the chronically unemployed group:

- ♦ **Feel underrepresented**, there are very few representatives or election candidates from the unemployed communities.
- ♦ **Don't believe** they have the power to influence policies in the country to improve the quality of life.
- ♦ **Have previous negative experiences** (manipulation, unfulfilled election promises, lies).
- ♦ **Disbelieve** that the institutions can improve their position and status.
- ♦ **Fear pressure and consequences** (opportunities for employment often hinges on party affiliation which, if challenged, could risk job opportunity).
- ♦ **Lack skills and knowledge** how and where to participate.
- ♦ **Have strong belief in the “party-isation”** of every segment of the society, especially with regards to employment.

OTHER ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

People from other ethnic communities share the same attitudes and behaviour as the general population in terms of their interest for civic and political participation. Barriers relevant for all demographic groups that affect the willingness and ability to be politically and civically active, are also relevant for the other ethnic communities:

- ♦ **Scepticism** about their power to influence politics and policies in the country.
- ♦ **Low level of trust** in the intentions and capacity of politicians to improve the quality of life.
- ♦ **Lack of channels** for active participation.
- ♦ **Fear of pressure and retaliation** for civic activism.

However, the civic and political behaviour of this demographic group is shaped by specific barriers:

- ♦ The perception that the society is shaped by ethnic rather than civic values.
- ♦ Perception that they live in a bi-ethnic society, where their interests are not represented.