UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences

**Report on contemporary forms of slavery as affecting persons belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minority communities**

Submission by Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) with input from the following GAATW members:

* Shanti Foundation, Nepal
* Alliance Against Traffic in Women and Children (AATWIN), Nepal
* Srijan Foundation, state of Jharkhand, India
* Open Gate / La Strada Macedonia, North Macedonia
* ASTRA – Anti-Trafficking Action, Serbia
* Capital Humano y Social (CHS) Alternativo, Peru
* Fundación Renacer, Colombia
* Corporación Espacios de Mujer, Colombia
* ECPAT, Guatemala

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is an international feminist network of 100 non-governmental organisations from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. GAATW sees the phenomenon of human trafficking intrinsically embedded in the context of migration for the purpose of labour. GAATW therefore promotes and defends the human rights of all migrants and their families against the threat of an increasingly globalised labour market and calls for safety standards for migrant workers in the process of migration and in the formal and informal work sectors - garment and food processing, agriculture and farming, domestic work, sex work - where slavery-like conditions and practices exist.

We thank the Special Rapporteur for this opportunity to provide input for his upcoming report to the Human Rights Council.

It is well-known that people from linguistic, ethnic, and other minorities are disproportionately affected by contemporary forms of slavery.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, we reject the notion that this is somehow a result of their ‘traditions’ or ‘culture’. In our experience, it is a result of the discrimination and negative social attitudes that minorities are subjected to. As a result, they are much more likely than the majority population to drop out of school, marry before the age of 18, start working before the age of 18, live below the poverty line, be unemployed or employed in the informal economy or in ‘3D jobs’ (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), and be at risk of social exclusion. For example, in Guatemala, it is estimated that nearly 4 out of 5 indigenous people live in poverty, and they are disproportionately affected by extreme poverty. Despite accounting for 50-60% of the Guatemalan population, Maya, Xinka and Garífuna communities face linguistic, geographic, and cultural barriers when accessing justice and public services.[[2]](#footnote-2) In North Macedonia, 71% of Roma families have monthly income below the national minimum and 29% of Roma from marginalised settlements have not completed primary education.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Therefore, this submission focuses on the following main issues: 1) root causes that lead to the socioeconomic and political exclusion of members of minority communities, which makes them vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery; 2) how governments are (or not) addressing these root causes and the vulnerabilities of minority communities; 3) how NGOs are addressing the vulnerabilities of minority communities; and 4) recommendations.

The minority communities discussed in this submission include the Chepang in Nepal, tribal communities in the state of Jharkhand, India, Roma in Southeast Europe, and indigenous and ethnic groups in Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia.

Some of the **root causes** for the exclusion and marginalisation of minorities include:

*Social attitudes of the majority population*. There is widespread mistrust and prejudice towards minorities. For example, in Nepal, the Chepang are perceived as ‘low-lives’, prone to drug and alcohol abuse or simply outsiders who have strange lifestyle and customs. In Southeast Europe, the Roma are similarly perceived as unreliable, thieves and liars, and outsiders with their own lifestyle and customs (the only positive perception of Roma is as entertainers – singers and dancers. Some become very famous performers but this doesn’t improve the overall attitudes). These negative social attitudes lead to discrimination and mistreatment by the majority population in education, healthcare and social services, and the labour market; when in formal employment, members of minorities are usually found in ‘3D jobs’. There is also very little positive representation of minorities in the media and popular culture and very few, if any, members of minorities in positions of power in the national government or the public or private sectors.

These negative social attitudes and the lack of positive representation create a situation where members of minorities don’t see the value of education and do not support their children to complete secondary or higher education. This means that young adults cannot find good jobs and are forced to rely on informal or low-wage work, child labour, early marriage, or unsafe migration for income. Even families who want their children to have education may feel forced to send them to work at an early age in order to contribute to the family’s meagre income.

*Infrastructure and access*. Due to these social attitudes and partly for historical reasons, minorities often live separately from the majority population, which affects their access to government services, education, and the labour market. In the state of Jharkhand, tribal communities, who are primarily agrarian and earn money from selling produce, live in remote areas with poor infrastructure and limited access to markets in urban areas. As a result, the few merchants who trade with them offer them very low prices. Because of their remoteness, the children are not enrolled in the regular education system. Similarly, in Nepal, the Chepang live in remote areas and many children don’t have birth certificates because of the lack of nearby government offices. In Southeast Europe, many Roma people live in neighbourhoods with extremely poor infrastructure and schools that contribute to, rather than combat, children’s social exclusion.

*Unviability of traditional livelihoods*. Some minorities have been surviving on agriculture and traditional occupations for generations but that’s become increasingly unviable in the modern age. In Jharkhand, tribal communities used to live off their land and exchange goods through a barter system but with the growth of the cash economy, they need money for everything. In addition, their access to forests has been reduced because of developmental projects while climate change has disrupted the weather patterns needed for their crops. The need for cash means that they need to migrate (or send their children away for work) because they can’t earn enough from their crops. Similarly, Maya, Xinka and Garífuna communities in Guatemala are being forced out of their territories and deprived of their main and often sole source of income. Climate change, state development projects in indigenous lands, and pervasive violence play a major role in their displacement. In Southeast Europe, traditional occupations of Roma, such as making or fixing horseshoes, household items, etc. or performing at celebrations, no longer offer sustainable income.

*Informal economy and illegal activities*. Rural and indigenous communities in Peru’s Amazon region are among the most affected by practices such as illegal logging. Besides its devastating impact on the environment, illegal logging is rife with slavery-like conditions in areas such as Ucayali, Loreto, and San Martín, where State presence is limited. Indigenous workers are frequently recruited by intermediaries under the promise of advances in cash, timber or food, and end up trapped in a cycle of debt and servitude. Labour exploitation linked to extractive industries and illegal logging, mining, and drug trafficking is widespread in the Amazon region across Peru, Brazil, and Colombia, and disproportionately affects indigenous communities.

*Violence, armed conflict, and forced displacement.* In Colombia, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities have been disproportionally impacted by forced displacement. Violence perpetuated by organised crime groups have forced many of these communities out of their ancestral land, threatening their traditional livelihoods and pushing them to conditions of extreme vulnerability. In Guatemala, structural violence and coercion compound with criminal violence, which prevent indigenous communities from securing their basic needs and force them to move internally and across borders in search of alternatives. In Bulgaria, authorities demolish ‘illegal houses’ in Roma neighbourhoods without any housing provisions for the displaced people, effectively making them homeless.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Weak rule of law.* Due to widespread discrimination and marginalisation, members of minority groups are also disproportionately affected by state corruption, impunity, and weak rule of law both when they try to report discrimination and when they try to access justice for exploitation and trafficking.

**What are governments doing** to combat marginalisation, social exclusion, and vulnerability to trafficking?

In all countries there are strategies, National Action Plans, and other measures to support the integration and socioeconomic empowerment of minorities, which would reduce their vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. We trust that the Special Rapporteur will receive information about these from governments or from publicly available sources. Briefly, governments *are* making efforts, such as free and compulsory education for children, programmes for providing food and social assistance, and more, but these efforts are not sufficient. As one colleague put it, even the best strategy is implemented by people and these people may hold negative attitudes towards minorities as described above.

In Southeast Europe, there is rampant anti-gypsyism, including at the highest political levels.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Roma are used as a scapegoat for all social problems; inflammatory anti-Roma rhetoric is used by political parties, often under the guise of combating ‘petty crime’ (also referred to as ‘Roma crime’ sometimes) or ‘abuse of the social system’. This toxic political and social discourse is reinforced by the media leading to a vicious circle where discrimination and negative social attitudes of the majority contribute to the lack of economic opportunities and, therefore, negative coping strategies of the minorities, which in turn contribute to further discrimination and negative social attitudes by the majority…

**What are NGOs doing** to combat minorities’ vulnerability to trafficking?

All GAATW members provide services to survivors of trafficking and other forms of violence without discrimination. Examples of activities directly targeting minorities include:

In Nepal, Shanti Foundation organises workshops where members of the Chepang community can come together, discuss issues that affect them, and build their capacity to engage with local and national policymakers. Both Shanti Foundation and AATWIN disseminate information about human trafficking and safe migration among the Chepang community and ensure that survivors of trafficking from the community are included in state anti-trafficking committees.

In Jharkhand, Srijan Foundation educates tribal communities about safe migration and the various government schemes for migrants (which remote tribal communities are often not aware of).

In North Macedonia, Open Gate/La Strada implements prevention and education programmes, including activities for raising the awareness and capacity of Roma women and girls about the risk factors for human trafficking and sexual violence. They also conduct training of Roma NGOs to build their skills for prevention and support of families, especially children exposed to harmful practices such as early/forced marriages, and risk of all forms of exploitation and trafficking, including forced begging.

In Colombia, Fundación Renacer works in the border region of La Guajira to provide assistance to indigenous women who are subjected to gender-based violence.

**Recommendations:**

Combat prejudice and stereotypes directed at minorities at all social levels: organise regular capacity-building of government officials and civil servants in cultural competency and anti-discrimination. Mandate the employment of members of minorities as professionals in government organisations. Punish, as appropriate, discriminatory speech by public officials and in the media. Promote positive representation of minority communities in the media and popular culture.

Improve labour and social support services to reduce risks of social exclusion of minorities and ensure that families can provide an adequate (financial and emotional) environment for children to complete their education. Provide equal access to general social services (education, healthcare, employment, and social support) to minorities, including through the use of positive action.

Ensure the proper funding, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and action plans for social and economic inclusion of minorities, with participation of members of these communities at every stage.

Disseminate information about safe migration, labour rights (in the country and abroad), or risks of exploitation in a language and manner that members of minority communities can understand (e.g. minority languages, audio-visual materials, and others).

Bangkok, 18 February 2022

1. In this submission, we will refer to exploitation and human trafficking as this is how GAATW members frame their work. However, these terms include most of the practices listed in the call for input. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Situation of human rights in Guatemala,* 2017, *http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Guatemala2017-en.pdf* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Findings from the community monitoring work of ESE, KHAM, Romano Cacipe and IRIZ in Roma communities in Shuto Orizari, Delcevo, Vinica and Pehcevo, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D Mikhailova and A Kachamov, *Roma Evictions and Demolition of Roma Houses: A Sustainable Solution for Roma Integration or a Problem of Roma Discrimination in Bulgaria*, Open Society Foundations, Sofia, 2017, <https://www.marginalia.bg/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/REPORT-2017-en.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 2012, the Bulgarian National Strategy for Roma Integration 2020 was uploaded on the website of the Presidency in a file named ‘NationalStrategyIntegrateMangali.pdf’ where the word ‘mangali’ is an extremely offensive word for Roma; see a news report in Bulgarian <https://inews.bg/National-Strategy-Integrate-Mangali-pdf-_l.a_i.203543.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)