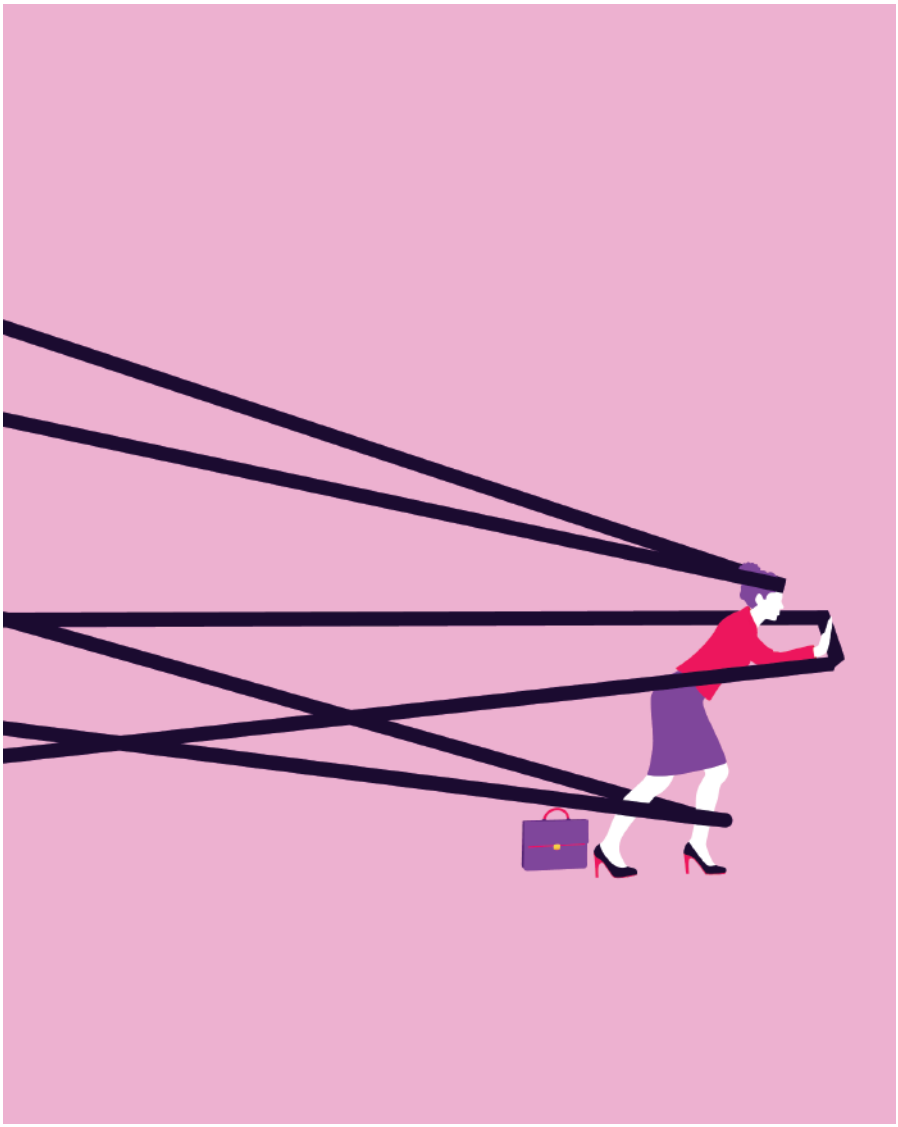

Qendra Kosovare për Studime Gjinore
Kosovar Gender Studies Center

ENHANCING THE SUPERPUNA PLATFORM EFFECTIVENESS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF ROMA, ASHKALI, AND EGYPTIAN WOMEN

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Researcher: Nora Jusufi
Editor: Dafina Prekazi

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INTRODUCTION: THE SITUATION OF ROMA, ASHKALI AND EGYPTIAN WOMEN

Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities face severe social disadvantages, shaped by prevalent racism and sexism in Kosovo. Women from these communities are notably more vulnerable compared to both the women of the dominant community and the men within their own ethnic groups. They encounter considerable obstacles in engaging and participating in various aspects of social, economic, and political life due to discriminatory practices existing across public and private spheres. For women belonging to these communities, economic participation remains a significant challenge, limiting their ability to assert their identity and status in both private and public spheres. This is primarily because these women have notably limited access to education, employment opportunities, and involvement in public activities.

The key factors used to assess the economic empowerment of women encompass their access to education, job opportunities, inheritance, and their involvement in making personal and family decisions. Looking at the employment statistics for 2020, it's observed that merely 14.1% of women are employed, while the unemployment rate among women stands at 32.3%. Additionally, in terms of job-seeking activity, women exhibit the least engagement, with 79.2% being inactive in seeking employment. Although specific employment figures by gender and ethnicity are not openly disclosed by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the situation appears more adverse for the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities.

There is a lack of institutional data that breaks down information based on ethnic backgrounds. Despite this, several studies indicate that marginalized communities have higher unemployment rates (over 90%) compared

to the Albanian community in Kosovo. This data highlights a significant level of unemployment within these groups and concerning practices that exclude them from the job market due to racial reasons. Moreover, the employment status within these communities is often unstable and marked by discrimination, with individuals frequently engaged in low-paying temporary positions.

Kosovo's legal framework contains a number of laws aimed at guaranteeing equal rights for minorities and promoting opportunities to achieve decent representation, well-being, and a favorable economic situation. Specifically, this is done by protecting and promoting the rights of communities and their members in Kosovo, by ensuring the use of official languages, by ensuring access to education and by respecting the cultural heritage of every community.

One of the latest initiatives of the government to facilitate the access of the youth to the job market and assist businesses in hiring workers is Superpuna. This online platform was specifically designed by the Government of Kosovo as part of the Youth Employment Scheme. This platform offers a tool for young people seeking employment and for businesses looking to recruit new employees. Through Superpuna, young individuals have the opportunity to access information about job vacancies, employment offers, internships, and various training opportunities.

To assess the access of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian women to superpuna portal and Kosovar Gender Studies Center (KGSC) conducted this thematic research to assess the Superpuna Platform Effectiveness in addressing the needs of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian Women in the labour market. The aim of this analysis is to also inform recommendations to the Government of Kosovo during its first year of operation given that it is still in its initial stages of implementation, and provide potential comprehensive

analysis for its improvement in the future. This analysis aims to serve as an informative resource, aiding potential enhancements of the platform in the future. Moreover, this assessment can function as a monitoring tool, offering valuable insights that can guide policy adjustments or changes. By identifying areas where the platform might be falling short, this evaluation aids in making well-informed decisions about necessary modifications or improvements in relation to also addressing the needs of marginalized communities in the labor market.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SUPERPUNA PLATFORM IN KOSOVO

The Superpuna platform, a government-sponsored employment initiative in Kosovo, is designed with the primary objectives of job creation and the reduction of unemployment. The program offers financial incentives to employers who hire new employees, with a specific focus on fostering opportunities for young men and women.

To participate in the program, employers must fulfill certain prerequisites, such as being registered with the Kosovo Business Registration Agency and demonstrating a consistent record of tax compliance. They may be from the private sector, public sector or non-governmental organizations who have the possibility of engaging up to 50 young people and subsidizing the salary of 264 euros for 6 months in a row, thereby increasing their human resources.

Likewise, employees recruited through the program must meet specific eligibility criteria, including being 18-25 years old, a minimum period of unemployment of six months and holding citizenship or permanent residency status in Kosovo.

The terms and conditions of the Superpuna platform stipulate the rights and responsibilities of both employers and employees engaged in the program. For instance, employers are obligated to provide employees with formal employment contracts and to ensure they receive a minimum wage. Simultaneously, employees are expected to diligently perform their job duties and adhere to their employer's established rules and regulations.

Overall, the Superpuna platform exhibits a well-structured design that holds the potential to significantly contribute to job creation and the alleviation of unemployment in Kosovo. However, it is imperative to recognize that the program is still in its initial stages of implementation. Consequently, a comprehensive monitoring mechanism is essential to assess its effectiveness over time.

PLANNED METHODOLOGY

The planned methodology to gather data for this thematic research initially involved several key steps. We intended to review official documents from the Ministry of Finance, Labour, and Transfers, seeking insights into the establishment of Superpuna. Additionally, we aimed to collect data on employers and employees registered in Superpuna, including details on size, region, economic activity, age, gender, ethnicity, and region.

However, despite numerous attempts to contact the minister, deputy minister, advisors, Superpuna contacts, and public relations persons, we encountered significant challenges. Unfortunately, our efforts to secure interviews, access official documents, and obtain relevant data were unsuccessful.

The proposed methodology also outlined stakeholder interviews with key figures such as Edi Gusia, Chief Executive Officer of the Agency of Gender Equality, Vesa Batalli, Deputy Executive Director and Program Manager at Voice of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, Habit Hajredini from the Office of Good Governance, and a representative from Superpuna or the Minister of Finance, Labour, and Transfers.

Furthermore, the methodology included interviews with 2-3 targeted beneficiaries among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women, identified or contacted through VORAE, if they granted permission. Additionally, collaboration with Superpuna staff to distribute an online survey to program members was considered, contingent upon obtaining consent.

Regrettably, due to the lack of cooperation and access to necessary resources, the intended methodology could not be fully implemented, leading to the challenges faced in obtaining comprehensive data and insights for this thematic research.

Despite the challenges faced in accessing official documents and comprehensive data, we were able to successfully conduct interviews with key stakeholders, including Vesa Batalli, Deputy Executive Director and Program Manager at Voice of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, and Edi Gusia, Chief Executive Officer of the Agency of Gender Equality. Additionally, we conducted interviews with three women who were employed through the Superpuna platform. However, these interviews represent a partial fulfillment of the originally planned methodology, as we were unable to secure interviews with other essential figures and access vital data.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE POSITION OF ROMA, ASHKALI, AND EGYPTIAN WOMEN IN KOSOVAN SOCIETY

The existing literature highlights multifaceted challenges faced by Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) women in Kosovo, particularly in the context of health, education, economic well-being, and gender-based discrimination (Strategy for the Advancement of the Rights of the Roma and Ashkali Communities in the Kosovo Society 2022-2026 – hereinafter Strategy 2026; Kosovar Gender Studies Center (KGSC), 2021). Financial barriers, distance from healthcare facilities, and long waiting times significantly hinder healthcare access for minority communities, with a substantial percentage opting not to visit doctors due to inability to pay for medicines or treatment, distance, lack of transportation, and extended waiting times (Strategy 2022-2026).

The KGSC report paints a sobering picture of the significant struggles faced by Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) women in Kosovo, outlining interconnected challenges in education, employment, and access to crucial information. A shocking 33% of RAE women have no education, and only 4% reach university (KGSC, 2021). This low level of educational attainment is fueled by economic hardship, family pressures, and societal expectations, including perceived safety concerns, which contribute to high non-enrollment and dropout rates, particularly at the primary level (KGSC, 2021). Notably, younger women cite lack of interest, suggesting potentially changing priorities, while older generations face financial hurdles as primary reasons for abandoning their education (KGSC, 2021).

The unemployment rate sits at a staggering 82%, highlighting the immense difficulty RAE women encounter in securing livelihoods (KGSC, 2021). This crisis stems from a multitude of factors, including limited job

opportunities, inadequate skills or qualifications, discriminatory practices, family responsibilities, and even health issues (KGSC, 2021). Most women enter the workforce between 18 and 29, but encounter various challenges like skill mismatch, unrecognized qualifications, and difficulty finding suitable jobs that match their capabilities, with younger women facing even greater challenges in this regard (KGSC, 2021). Furthermore, Roma women report lower levels of spousal support, while Egyptian women receive less family support, further hindering their employment prospects (KGSC, 2021).

Television and word-of-mouth dominate as information sources, with NGOs and community organizations playing a smaller role, indicating potential gaps in outreach strategies (KGSC, 2021). Interestingly, a generational shift emerges in information consumption habits, with younger women increasingly turning to social media, while older generations remain reliant on television (KGSC, 2021). Understanding these preferences is crucial for crafting effective communication strategies that resonate with different age groups within these communities. Additionally, while many within RAE communities support women's employment and financial independence, concerns about the impact on family life persist, revealing complex gender dynamics and the presence of traditional views (KGSC, 2021).

The report underscores the necessity for multifaceted interventions that address the interconnected challenges faced by RAE women. This includes tackling educational barriers through economic support, family engagement, and safety measures (KGSC, 2021). Equipping women with marketable skills through effective training programs and advocating for equal access to employment opportunities are crucial steps towards achieving sustainable livelihoods (KGSC, 2021). Combating discriminatory practices in hiring and fostering family support through childcare services and addressing family pressures are also essential components

of empowerment (KGSC, 2021). Leveraging television and social media for targeted communication campaigns tailored to different age groups, while simultaneously strengthening the role of community organizations in outreach and resource provision, can ensure successful information dissemination and empower RAE women to navigate the complexities of their circumstances (KGSC, 2021).

Turning attention to the Superpuna employment platform, GAP Institute's report uncovers gender-based discrimination in job vacancies, highlighting linguistic biases in the platform's language usage. The launch of the Superpuna platform on February 6, 2023, aimed to provide employment opportunities for young individuals, but GAP's analysis reveals a significant prevalence of gender stereotypes in job titles. Of the analyzed job vacancies, 79% contained gender stereotypes, with 74% stereotyping men and 26% stereotyping women. The language used in the platform's advertisements perpetuates gender biases, deviating from the Law on Gender Equality (GAP Institute, 2023).

Stakeholder perspectives on the Superpuna platform vary. Vesa Batalli, Deputy Executive Director and Program Manager at the Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (VORAE), is concerned about the program's mismatch with the unique challenges faced by RAE communities, particularly women. High job requirements and a lack of outreach strategies contribute to the exclusion of a significant portion of the RAE population. Additionally, socioeconomic barriers, including extreme poverty, high unemployment rates, low education levels, and persistent discrimination, further hinder the program's impact (Interview with Vesa Batalli, October 18, 2023). Batalli recommends changes to enhance inclusivity, such as reducing selection criteria, developing targeted engagement strategies, and involving organizations like VORAE in program implementation.

As part of our outreach, we connected with approximately eight Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women, intending to explore their employment experiences through Superpuna with the assistance of VORAE. However, one respondent claimed employment in gastronomy but clarified it was not through Superpuna, leading to the cancellation of that interview. Another participant, citing an out-of-country marriage (conveyed indirectly through a male relative who answered the phone), was no longer residing in Kosovo, rendering an interview impractical. Some individuals did not have working phones, further limiting our outreach.

Ultimately, only three interviews were successfully conducted. Among these, two women displayed vague awareness of Superpuna and the specifics of their employment process. Despite the lack of clarity, both indicated they did not face discrimination, received compensation, and notably, one remained employed even after the subsidy period concluded. It's important to note that the responses, while providing insights, were somewhat brief, and no definitive conclusions can be drawn from them.

Conversely, Edi Gusia, the Executive Director of the Agency of Gender Equality, views the Superpuna initiative favorably. Recognizing its efforts to provide employment opportunities for young individuals, Gusia emphasizes the need for data to assess its effectiveness. While not directly involved in implementation, the Agency of Gender Equality remains confident that the initiative promotes gender equality by ensuring equal access to employment opportunities for both men and women (Interview with Edi Gusia, October 27, 2023).

TABLE 1: *Stakeholder Perspectives on Superpuna Platform: A Compare and Contrast*

Aspect	Vesa Batalli (VORAE)	RAE Women (Limited Sample)	Edi Gusia (Agency of Gender Equality)
Concerns/Challenges	Job-skills mismatch, Lack of targeted outreach, Socioeconomic barriers	Limited awareness, Barriers to participation, Potential social stigma	-
Positive Experiences/Views		Employment opportunities, Empowerment, Autonomy	Promotes gender equality, Provides valuable opportunities
Recommendations/Focus	Reduce job requirements, Develop targeted engagement strategies, Comprehensive support services, Increase data collection and analysis		Data-driven approach, Collaboration and communication

Superpuna Platform Impact on Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women in Kosovan society

In the challenging landscape of Kosovo's labor market, the Superpuna program emerged as a beacon of hope, offering a potential avenue for job creation and economic empowerment. However, this optimism is tempered when considering its impact on marginalized communities, particularly Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) women.

Evaluation Challenges

As mentioned above, efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the Superpuna program encountered significant challenges due to non-responsiveness from key stakeholders. This lack of cooperation hampered the intended methodology. However, with the current information gathered, literature

review, and Kosovar Gender Studies Center stance, below we address some issues with Superpuna Platform.

Addressing Systemic Issues: The Plight of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Women

Civil Registration and Early Marriages

The absence of recognition for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women in civil registers creates significant barriers to the realization of their rights, exposing them to a range of vulnerabilities, such as the threats of trafficking and illegal adoption. This lack of formal registration further complicates endeavors to monitor and address early marriages, a pervasive issue particularly affecting the Roma community. This phenomenon often stems from economic challenges and a deficiency in educational opportunities, amplifying the need for comprehensive measures to rectify these systemic issues (Strategy 2022-2026).

Impact of COVID-19 on Economic Well-being

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately intensified the economic struggles faced by women from the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) communities. A staggering 89% of individuals within these groups expressed a belief that their economic circumstances had deteriorated during the pandemic (KGSC, 2021). This underscores the imperative for targeted interventions aimed at alleviating the economic burdens specifically borne by underprivileged social groups within these communities. Addressing the nuanced challenges exacerbated by the pandemic requires tailored and strategic measures to foster economic recovery and resilience.

Superpuna's Potential Impact on Education and Age Criteria

A pivotal consideration in evaluating the Superpuna program revolves around its potential implications for education, particularly concerning the age criteria set for participants. The program's current emphasis on individuals aged 18 to 25 raises concerns about inadvertently contributing to a heightened dropout rate among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) women. The confluence of economic hardships, early marriage practices, and limited educational opportunities presents a multifaceted challenge that Superpuna must conscientiously address. Crafting a nuanced approach that recognizes and navigates the intersecting dynamics of these challenges is essential to the program's effectiveness and inclusivity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This comprehensive analysis underscores the nuanced challenges faced by Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women in accessing Superpuna opportunities. By addressing eligibility criteria, enhancing outreach, and acknowledging the intersectionality of issues, Superpuna can evolve into a more inclusive and impactful program, contributing significantly to the empowerment of marginalized communities in Kosovo. Based on this, the following recommendations are proposed for a holistic approach:

- **Revisiting Eligibility Criteria:**
  - Undertake a comprehensive review of eligibility criteria within the Superpuna program to enhance accessibility for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) women. This should involve recognizing and accommodating the unique challenges faced by these communities to foster greater inclusivity.

- **Community-Centric Outreach and Technical Support:**
  - Launch targeted outreach campaigns tailored to the specific needs of RAE communities, ensuring that program information is presented in languages relevant to these communities. Provide technical support to applicants to enhance awareness, facilitate the application process, and improve overall success rates.

- **Strategic Engagement with RAE Communities:**
  - Develop a dedicated engagement strategy for interacting with Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, collaborating closely with organizations like VORAE. This approach aims to understand and address the specific challenges faced by women of these communities, fostering a collaborative environment that contributes to the success of the Superpuna program.

- **Unconscious Bias Mitigation Training:**
  - Implement training programs for both employers and Superpuna staff to address unconscious biases that may inadvertently impede the employment of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women. This training should raise awareness, promote inclusivity, and ensure fair treatment throughout the recruitment and employment processes.

- **Expansion of Age Criteria:**
  - Consider expanding the age criteria of the Superpuna program to encompass a broader range, acknowledging that the current focus on individuals aged 18 to 25 may inadvertently contribute to a higher dropout rate among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women. A more inclusive age range can better accommodate the diverse circumstances and educational backgrounds of potential applicants.

- **Establishing Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:**
  - Create a comprehensive and transparent monitoring and evaluation framework for the Superpuna program. This framework should address the existing lack of transparency, providing a structured approach to assessing the program's impact on Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women, among other communities, over the long term. Regular evaluations should inform adaptive changes to enhance effectiveness and inclusivity.

- **Understanding Information Habits for Effective Outreach:**
  - Since television and social media are the dominant sources of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women, use them for targeted campaigns about job openings, workshops, or training programs. Consider engaging influencers from these communities to spread awareness.
  - Partner with local NGOs and community leaders to spread information within trusted networks. Encourage participants to share opportunities with their peers through word-of-mouth.
  - Offer digital literacy workshops to help women navigate online platforms and access Superpuna resources. Provide internet access options or mobile-friendly interfaces to ensure inclusivity.

- **Tailoring messaging to their information preferences:**
  - Use relatable language and imagery that resonates with their experiences and aspirations. Avoid jargon or overly technical terms.
  - Highlight how Superpuna can improve their lives through financial independence, skills development, or personal growth. Share inspiring stories of other women who benefited from the platform.

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