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Roma community-based empowerment does matter! A qualitative study of social workers' experiences with the empowerment process of social workers in central Slovakia

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the implementation of an empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities from the perspective of social workers. Data from 11 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using selected analytical procedures of grounded theory, identifying the main categories: the socioeconomic background of clients (context), community needs and long-term goals (causal conditions), social support and external influences (intervening conditions), and educational projects and participation (strategic actions). The empowerment process leads to independence, sustainability, and improvement of the community environment (consequences). While social work at the micro and meso levels is crucial for the inclusion of the poorest residents of segregated Roma enclaves, significant achievements have not been made at the macro level, particularly in terms of political involvement and the fight against anti-Roma racism. The study also highlights systemic reliance on European structural funds and the lack of state support. Future research could map the perspectives and empowerment of emerging helping professionals.

Keywords: Community; Empowerment; Roma; Slovakia; Social Work

Introduction

Improvement of the socioeconomic conditions, better health, social inclusion, increasing employment or active social participation and non-discrimination are several issues for the EU Regions with a focus on marginalised Roma communities. Individual and collective empowerment, collaboration, trust, and capacity-building of marginalised citizens' settlements in the field, and community social work are the political, educational, economic, social and healthcare European priorities (European Commission, 2020). Although the empowerment of the Roma has been the subject of several research studies (Francés-García et al., 2024; Szilvasi and Saitovic-Jovanovic, 2023), there is still no description of this phenomenon in the context of social work in Central Europe. Thus, we tried to discover the possibilities of implementing an empowering approach in the marginalised Roma communities of central Slovakia from the social worker's perspective.

Roma-led social accountability and legal empowerment initiatives aim to improve the right to health for Roma communities, addressing health disparities and advocating for equitable healthcare access and transformative changes in structural and cultural terms (Alexiadou, 2023; Ryder, 2024). Several studies have shown the significance of community-based empowerment for the Roma population. Miranda et al. (2019) and Málovics et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of work-integrated learning in augmenting individual empowerment and social inclusion. They also stress the necessity of participatory action research and health justice advocacy to tackle power imbalances and foster collaboration among stakeholders. Nevertheless, they warn about the potential obstacles posed by structural discrimination and stigmatisation. Collectively, these studies propose a comprehensive approach (encompassing work-integrated learning, participatory action research, and policy interventions) as essential for empowering the Roma community.

Empowerment, as a key theory in social work, focuses on enhancing individual and collective power, which enables people, families, and communities to improve their living conditions (Gutierrez et al., 1998). This process involves sharing power and creating mutual relationships that allow people to increase their sense of control and optimise their independence (Febriana, 2011). Empowerment in the context of Roma communities in Central Europe, especially in the Czech and Slovak Republics, represents a strategic approach to achieving equality for EU citizens (European Commission, 2020). Social workers can use an empowerment approach at the micro, meso, and macro levels of intervention to help people influence their own lives (Joseph, 2019). Roma communities in Central Europe, especially in the Czech and Slovak Republics, face several challenges, including absolute poverty, cultural specificities, and segregated enclaves. These conditions create obstacles for the implementation of empowerment principles in social work (Szilvasi and Saitovic-Jovanovic, 2023). Empowerment theory in the context of Roma communities emphasises the need for cultural sensitivity and communication skills, and the establishment of close cooperation between social workers and the Roma community (Kourova and Webb, 2022). Studies conducted in the Czech and Slovak Republics show that empowerment is an effective tool for improving the quality of life of Roma citizens and increasing their social participation (Lajcakova, 2010). Kolesárová (2012) examined the empowerment of Roma communities through urban enterprises, which led to increased employment and social integration. Svobodova et al. (2021) emphasise that improving access to healthcare for Roma living in social exclusion is a key aspect of empowerment. Kourová and Webb (2022) investigated the political aspects of the empowerment of Roma communities in the Czech Republic. Their study shows that empowerment can be used as a tool to increase the political and social participation of Roma. They further emphasise that cultural sensitivity and understanding of the specific needs of Roma communities are key factors for the successful implementation of an empowerment approach. Moree et al. (2023) focused on racial inequality and education in the Czech Republic. Their study suggests that educational programmes aimed at Roma children that incorporate the principles of empowerment can contribute to better school results and an overall improvement in social inclusion. Svobodova et al. (2021) dealt with improving access to healthcare for Roma living in social exclusion. Their study used concept mapping to identify barriers and opportunities for improving access to healthcare. The results show that the empowerment approach can play a key role in overcoming these obstacles.

The roles and tasks of Slovak and Czech social workers in practice and research require flexible and modern tailored approaches for individuals and communities in the rhythm of a rapidly developing eco-social and digital society. Social work in Roma communities requires that, in addition to adequate education with a focus on cultural sensitivity and the Roma language, social workers have soft skills aimed at communication and establishing close cooperation to implement the empowerment model and support for the target group. Thus, this study explores the possibilities of implementing an empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities through interviews with Slovak social workers in practice. The research goals are to identify the main barriers and supporting factors influencing social workers' implementation of the empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities; analyse the impact of the empowerment approach applied by social workers on the long-term autonomy and sustainability of Roma communities at the micro and meso levels; and to examine the role of social workers in overcoming socioeconomic barriers and improving the community environment in segregated Roma enclaves.

Empowerment as a conceptual framework for social work in the Roma community

The complex concept of empowerment is multidimensional and not a one-size-fits-all solution. There is ongoing debate as to whether it should be considered a superordinate construct, an aggregate construct, or a set of distinct constructs. This study outlines and explores the possibilities of implementing a Roma Community-based empowerment approach through Slovak social workers in practice. To comprehend and elucidate the phenomenon of community-based empowerment, as well as its connection to the various dimensions of social work among Roma citizens, an empowerment conceptual framework is employed.

Empowerment is a fundamental concept in social work, focusing on enhancing the capacities of individuals, families, and communities to gain control over their lives and make autonomous decisions. According to Gutierrez et al. (1998), empowerment is defined as the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power to enable individuals to improve their circumstances. However, this definition only scratches the surface of a much broader, multifaceted concept.

Empowerment in social work can be seen as a dynamic process that not only addresses individual empowerment but also works on structural and systemic levels to challenge existing inequalities and power dynamics (Joseph, 2019). It involves the redistribution of power, enabling marginalised groups, such as the Roma communities, to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. This process requires a shift from a top-down approach, where power remains in the hands of authorities, to a bottom-up approach, where clients actively engage in decision-making and gain control over the resources that affect their lives.

There are several dimensions of empowerment that should be considered: personal empowerment, which focuses on increasing an individual's self-efficacy and confidence; interpersonal empowerment, which enhances relationships and social networks; and political empowerment, which seeks to address larger systemic barriers and create opportunities for marginalised groups to influence policies and institutions (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). In the context of marginalised Roma communities, empowerment also entails overcoming structural barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion (Szilvasi and Saitovic-Jovanovic, 2023).

Incorporating empowerment into social work practice means not only helping individuals improve their current situations but also facilitating their capacity to make long-term changes. It involves collaborative strategies, cultural sensitivity, and capacity-building efforts that help marginalised groups advocate for themselves (Lee, 2001). The empowerment approach in this study focuses on community engagement, enhancing both individual autonomy and collective action within Roma communities.

The implementation of Roma community-based empowerment stands as a viable strategic approach for social work to promote equality among European citizens. As asserted by Joseph (2019), social workers operating at the micro-, meso and macro levels of intervention can adopt an empowerment strategy to assists individuals in steering their own lives. This signifies that social workers actively engage in the empowerment process as facilitators, rather than solely as authorities

dictating how and in what manner individuals should act. Nevertheless, the foundation of empowerment theory is the belief that quality of life can be enhanced through empowering individuals and communities, implying that a community comprised of individuals can develop the capacity to work on themselves (and with one another) to enhance their personal, interpersonal, and community-based political influence. Furthermore, Febriana (2011) stressed that empowerment is a dynamic and multidimensional process involving two or more parties, characterised by power-sharing activities and the establishment of mutual relationships, thereby enabling individuals to augment their sense of autonomy, and facilitating the optimisation of their independence. However, critiques exist regarding the oversimplification of empowerment, underscoring the necessity of recognising the intricacies and variables inherent in its implementation to achieve successful results. In essence, empowerment theory underscores the significance of empowering individuals to seize control, make significant contributions and instigate positive transformations at both individual and institutional levels.

In Slovakia, social work professionals engaged with the Roma community have identified the significance of competencies such as sustained dialogue, collaborative problem-solving and a profound dedication to human services. The objective of social services in Slovakia is to guide individuals towards significant social values and to emphasise the active participation of service recipients in the provided activities. Community Health and Social Workers frequently lack the requisite training in health promotion, necessitating the development of intervention tools to enhance community health practices. Moreover, the education of Roma children and youth in Slovak NGOs reflects class-determined educational strategies and a pedagogical authority based on liberal middle-class values, impeding integrative efforts.

We have set the following research goals:
- Identify the main barriers and supporting factors influencing social workers' implementation of the empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities.
- Analyse the impact of the empowerment approach applied by social workers on the long-term autonomy and sustainability of Roma communities at the micro and meso levels.
- Examine the role of social workers in overcoming socioeconomic barriers and improving the community environment in segregated Roma enclaves.

Materials and methods

To meet the article's aim, a qualitative exploratory study design was used in this study. This approach was adopted since: (1) research on empowerment in marginalised Roma communities has been quite rare in current social work discourse in the Slovak Republic (Smatanova, 2015). Thus, a deep examination of this phenomenon from the perspective of social workers may potentially contribute to opening the professional debate regarding the strengthening and effective implementation of empowerment practices in social work with marginalised Roma communities. (2) Prior international evidence highlights the importance of positive outcomes of empowering principles among members of the Roma community in daily living activities (ISSA, 2016; Miranda et al., 2019). Therefore, it would be valuable to extend the knowledge base in the field, taking into consideration the specifics of the Roma community living in the Slovak context. (3) Examining the cho-

sen phenomenon from the perspective of key stakeholders – social workers themselves – allows for a deeper insight into empowering social work practices in the natural environment of segregated Roma settlements, along with institutionalised support within community centres.

Samples
The following selection criteria were used for participants' recruitment. Each participant had to: (1) work as a social worker in a segregated Roma community; (2) work in a community centre for a heterogeneous Roma community in central Slovakia; (3) apply the principles of empowerment into their social work with a marginalised Roma community; (4) speak the Slovak or Romani language fluently. A multidisciplinary team of researchers educated in social work recruited participants via personal contact, telephone, and email. Three research team members were familiar with the culture and language of the participants. This encouraged a feeling of trust and respect among the participants and, in turn, may have increased the credibility, reliability and validity of data collection. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit further participants, as the interviewees referred the researchers to other social workers who could potentially participate (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Via these routes, a total of 11 social workers were recruited for the study. Since purposive sampling was carried out with variation in terms of gender and education, there were 8 women and 3 men, with an average length of social work practice of 7.5 years, and an average age of 41.3 years. Most participants (n = 9) had a university education and worked as social workers in community centres (established and supported by EU funds).

Field research was conducted in the region of central Slovakia, where both sub-ethnic groups of Roma live: *Vlachiko* and *Rumungre Roma*. This is a linguistically mixed environment, with Slovak, Roma, and Hungarian minorities.

Study context
The data presented in this study were collected as part of a larger qualitative study during the implementation of a scientific project in the years 2022–2024 (supported by science grant agency VEGA – Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, number: 1/0777/22), focusing on the *Individual and Collective Empowerment of Marginalised Settlement Dwellers in Community Social Work*. However, the results presented in this paper are limited to the views and experiences of social workers, with barriers hindering the implementation of empowerment principles during social work with the marginalised Roma community.

Data collection
To answer the research question, a qualitative exploratory research design – based on the technique of semi-structured interviews – was chosen for the data collection (Green and Thorogood, 2018). The basic interview scenario was divided into two thematical sections. In section one, participants were asked to reflect on their *awareness of empowerment*. There was a focus on probing for information on whether they are familiar with the principles of empowerment in social work practice. Section two was focused on interviewees' practical experience with empowerment. Specifically, participants were asked to consider the circumstances under which they implement empowerment principles in their work, with major attention given to obstacles hindering the implementation of empowerment principles during social work with the Roma community.

Following the participants' statements during the interview, the basic scenario questions were flexibly supplemented by further relevant inquiries to encourage the participants to speak as freely as possible.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and May 2024 in the Slovak Republic. While theoretical data saturation was noted by the eighth interview, three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the saturation (Denzin et al., 2023; Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a mobile phone ($n = 4$) or personally ($n = 7$), depending on participants' preferences and availability. Mobile phone interviews permit access to participants from a vast geographical area (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021). Our participants came from central Slovakia, covering an area of 9,454 km^2. The Banská Bystrica Self-governing Region, where the data collection predominantly took place, is the largest self-governing region in central Slovakia. On average, the interviews lasted 54.7 minutes (SD = 28.52, range = 13–102 minutes).

Analyses and reporting

The data were analysed using selected procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). In this sense, the analytical process proceeded as follows: (1) the interview transcript was subjected to open coding, supplemented by memos; (2) 61 codes stemming from the open coding procedure were classified into 7 main categories; and (3) using axial coding procedures, a paradigmatic model was created. The paradigmatic model was chosen as the main cartographic tool guiding data interpretation, because it enables an in-depth understanding of the inquiry phenomenon to be gained by concentrating on the pattern of relationships between the categories (Fig. 1).

In this research, axial coding was used to connect the main categories identified during open coding and their relationships in a pattern (as presented in the results). Axial coding involves the process of linking categories with their subcategories and uncovering the relationships between them based on context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Thus this helped to create a structured model that considers various influences on the empowerment of clients at the micro and meso levels, including the strategies of social workers and their impact on clients' lives.

As part of the data validity, we used interpretive validity (Hendl, 2005; Maxwell, 1996) as we were primarily interested in what different events and behaviours mean for the participants in the process (in our case social workers themselves). We also aimed to capture the emic perspective by focusing primarily on the language expressions of the participants, as well as their own words, intentions, and concepts.

Results

The central category (phenomenon) to which the following refer: context, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategic proceedings, and consequences – is "Empowerment of the Roma Community" (Fig. 1). Empowerment of clients includes processes and activities focused on increasing the autonomy and capabilities of clients to manage their own resources and problems. Social workers perceived the process primarily on two levels: in the micro and meso spheres. The micro level is focused on working with the individual. This is primarily about basic advice regarding basic needs such as housing or solving financial problems (indebtedness, personal bankruptcy, etc.). The middle, or meso-level, is oriented towards community social work en-bloc. It focuses on helping all residents of marginalised settlements. These are mainly matters of community planning and organising.
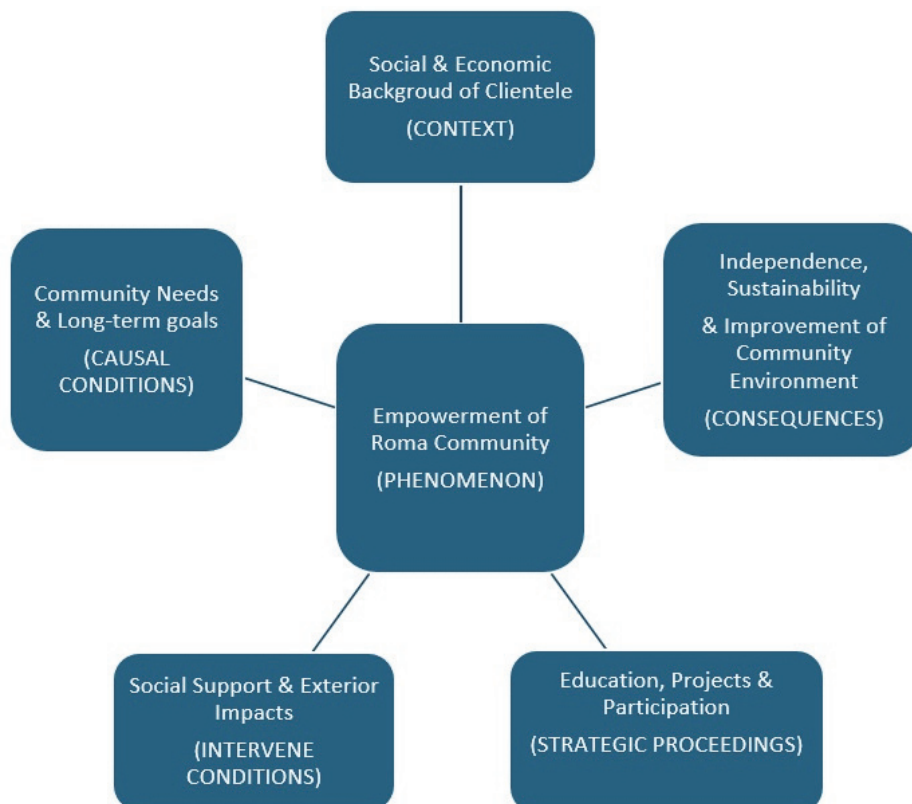

Fig. 1. Paradigmatic model focusing on empowerment of the Roma community

Context

The context is divided into two fundamental areas: community conditions and the social and economic background of clients. Community conditions primarily include housing, infrastructure, and the social environment. Housing is crucial for the field of integration, as it is the primary need of every person. It is impossible to engage effectively in the labour market without access to water or heat; clients cannot observe personal hygiene and are excluded in advance from work groups and serious employment. The situation is better in the towns, where the Roma community has begun to manage apartment buildings independently in cooperation with social workers. If it happens that one family does not pay the rent and the water and electricity bills, social workers help them, because otherwise it would impact the whole community. Social workers accompany the clientele and are at their disposal; in the field of housing the results of social work are excellent and clear.

Solving social and economic problems of clients is also a very common agenda of social workers. They primarily include the following areas: debt history, low financial literacy, and dependence on social services. Indebtedness and preparing for personal bankruptcy are highly relevant topics today. Many members of the Roma community are in debt due to low-paid jobs and unemployment. The region in which the research was carried out is one of the poorest parts of Slovakia, where there are low opportunities for employment on the labour market. Social workers are trained in the field of financial literacy, and their assistance appears to be key, allowing clients to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Causal conditions

This section includes direct community needs and the defining of long-term goals. In addition to the needs already mentioned, current challenges include infrastructure repairs, education, and financial stabilisation. In the urban environment, near to Roma-inhabited apartment buildings, the main road will be reconstructed, which will create a dusty and noisy environment. Together with community leaders, social workers are preparing for a meeting with important actors and representatives of the city about noise reduction for residents.

As part of the empowerment process, social workers set a long-term goal: increasing autonomy and independence and improving quality of life. They are making progress in this area and the results are noticeable; this is a long-term process that has been going on for more than two decades. The creation of a community council has helped; members are Roma women and men from the locality. In addition, it is an advantage that most social workers have a second-level university education and claim to be of Roma nationality. Social workers achieve the greatest successes in the field of housing. They have managed to pay off the tenants' debts and repair apartment buildings. The last stage is the sale of the apartments into personal ownership: *"We have already completed the first phase; we have also completed the second one. And the third phase is the establishment of a separate legal entity, that is, an apartment building with everything that belongs to it, with proper representation and presidency…"* (social worker, female, 50 years old, 2024).

Strategies

Strategies important for supporting the empowerment process include:

1. Educational programmes and training – offering courses and training focused on developing practical skills, financial literacy, and self-management.

"We taught them how to save water, in other words, financial literacy, because we explained to them that they can save the most on water consumption" (social worker, female, 26 years old, 2024).

2. Support and materials for projects – providing materials and guidelines for independent projects within the community.
"Mostly, we give them the materials, and they manage it themselves. Most of them come and say they need, xxx [anonymised man's name] is able to handle it, and he goes there and supervises them, and mostly they fix it themselves" (social worker, male, 49 years old, 2024).

3. Leadership roles and participation – developing leadership skills among clients and supporting their active involvement in decision-making processes.
"We are actually an example for them to observe and learn by observation" (social worker, female, 26 years old, 2024).

Intervene conditions

Two intervention conditions were identified:
1. Social support: community centres and social workers as facilitators and supporters.
2. External influences: laws, policies, and financing that may either support or hinder empowerment processes.

On a practical level, social work is a professional activity that aims at the social change of clients. Empowerment is the driving force that leads to it. Social workers are key professionals who provide guidance, professional advice, and social support. On the other hand, there are other stakeholders who can hinder the process of social inclusion. During the research implementation, in some localities these were the representatives of the city and their councils. It is therefore important that the individual key actors pull together, because if municipal authorities and social workers at community centres do not cooperate with the aim of integrating the Roma community, the process of improving community life is greatly endangered. On the other hand, if the city, school, church, and community centre are in harmony, social change is possible.

Consequences

The empowering approach focuses its efforts on three key areas to drive social change within the Roma community:
1. Increased autonomy: clients who can independently manage their housing and participation in community life.
2. Improvement of the community environment: a more active and self-regulated community with better infrastructure and social bonds.
3. Sustainability and development: long-term development of community social work resulting in permanent sustainability and improvement of social and economic conditions.

After decades of applying an empowering approach, significant shifts in clients' lives are evident. These are primarily independence and self-reliance, and this manifests not only in communication with the authorities or searching for employment, but in the management of housing and the environment in which the Roma community lives. The last stage, which is sustainability, has also been fulfilled. Here, social workers act more like accompanying professionals who delegate power into the hands of the Roma community.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the possibilities of implementing an empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities through interviews with Slovak social workers in practice. We found that the process of empowering clients from the Roma community matters. Despite the difficult social and economic situation of the Roma minority, long-term social work leads to increasing autonomy, improvement of the community environment, and sustainable development.

There are several studies in the international comparison of collective empowerment. Sjöberg et al. (2015) compared this concept in Mumbai, India, and Stockholm, Sweden. They found that in India, this concept is mainly fulfilled in the informal sector. Whereas in Stockholm, the interventions are aimed at strengthening social networks, without the direct intention of achieving social changes. Conversely, in Mumbai, social workers strive to empower marginalised groups so that social change is achievable. The reason is the lack of sufficient resources to meet increasing levels of social exclusion (Sjöberg et al., 2016).

Similar surveys are absent in the Central European area, and especially in the Czech and Slovak Republics. However, the concept of empowerment tends to be used in relation to the marginalised Roma community. Lajcakova (2010) investigated the possibilities of strengthening the status of Roma in Slovakia through non-territorial national autonomy. Her study suggests that political empowerment can contribute to greater social integration and improve the living conditions of Roma communities. The political level of empowerment is perceived as the least developed from the social workers' point of view. This helping profession primarily deals with clients on an individual and community level. So, the micro and meso levels of social work are saturated. Social workers do not directly contribute to activism at the political level.

Kolesárová (2012) focused on the empowerment of Roma communities through municipal enterprises. The results of her study show that these businesses can increase the employment and social participation of Roma. This approach also promotes economic self-sufficiency and improves the quality of life in Roma communities. This study confirms that, in the context of community social work, the meso level is ensured in practice with high quality. In addition to social projects, such as social enterprises, so-called "community councils" were established. These are composed of representatives of the Roma community and other important stakeholders (municipality, school, community centre, etc.). This institute is rare and was practiced in only one of the investigated locations. However, it serves as an example of good practice, and it is highly likely that similar "community councils" will be created in other places with a concentration of segregated settlements.

Social workers in the Slovak Republic play a key role in implementing the empowerment approach in Roma communities. This requires not only professional education, but also soft skills focused on communication and building trust (Joseph, 2019). The micro-level of social work, at the level of individuals, is also developed at a high-quality level in practice. It is focused on finding employment, debt relief, and solving problems with housing, access to water, and broad-spectrum problems in the Roma community. Szilvasi and Saitovic-Jovanovic (2023) looked at social responsibility and legal empowerment to improve the health of underserved Roma communities in Eastern Europe. The study highlights the importance of community involvement and participatory methods to achieve sustainable health improvements. The fight against anti-Roma racism, prejudices, and stereotypes appears to be a very important area. In the context of the Slovak Republic and empowerment, the implementation agency of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic implemented the national project "Building professional capacities at the community level" between 2015 and 2023. The goal of the project was to increase empowerment at the community level – i.e., to provide high-quality professional support to individuals and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion to solve their social problems on their own, and by targeted use of community resources to provide support and promote the development of the entire community (Ministry of Labour…, 2020). In contrast, in the "Strategy for equality, inclusion and participation of Roma until 2030" (The Office of the Plenipotentiary…, 2022), empowerment is not mentioned at all, and social work is only marginally mentioned. Social work carried out in marginalised Roma communities works mainly at the micro and meso levels. Society-wide condemnation of anti-Roma racism is lacking on the macro level, political representatives prefer an anti-Roma narrative. It is therefore necessary to activate the oppressed so that they know how to draw attention to the negative and stereotypical portrayal of the Roma community.

We agree with the recommendations of Škobla et al. (2019) that continuous education of social workers is necessary. Educational activities should focus on breaking down exotic ideas about clients (Roma are still perceived by some social workers as a mysterious group). In addition, it is desirable to introduce intercultural training against stereotypes and prejudices (focused on the psychological aspects of work and how to "talk" with the client), and education focused on distinguishing paternalistic and non-paternalistic ways of helping. In our research, the sample consisted of social workers with many years of experience.

Strengths and limitations
Research focused on empowerment in social work has yet to be carried out in the Slovak Republic. In our research we focused on the perspective of social workers as they implement the empowerment process in their practice. Although qualitative research does not require a consensus of experiences to be captured – and therefore cannot be directly generalised – it can still provide insight into the perspectives of social workers in practice, given the size of the sample. The study included a total of 11 social workers of varying ages and educational backgrounds, which adds to its credibility and objectivity. The triangulation of researchers with different educational backgrounds in social work and public health and the use of a known methodology for data analysis, which increases the reliability and credibility of the findings, can also be recognised as strengths of the study. Thus, our findings can be generalised to the entire territory of Slovakia.

The current study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The recruitment of participants based on personal contacts can potentially contribute to bias. The data should therefore be verified by multiple data sources (i.e., observation, focus group interviews), with study participants being asked to evaluate the results of the data analysis. The research sample was relatively small, with a higher proportion of female social workers participating in the study. A pilot interview was not conducted, potentially reducing the validity of the collected data. Although the primary goal of our study was to investigate the possibilities of implementing an empowering approach in marginalised Roma communities from the

perspective of a social workers, each interview only reflects the perspective of one actor involved in social work interventions.

Additionally, the implementation of the research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, number UKF/73/2024/191013:003.

Recommendations

In the future, a comparative study could be carried out comparing social workers who lack experience with those who have many years of experience in applying the principles of empowerment in the practice of social work with the Roma community. Thus, future research should include pilot-testing on a comparable target group, ensuring that interview questions are clear and effectively elicit the intended information. Future research should therefore balance the sample in the above-mentioned areas.

Conclusion

The results of this study clearly show that the implementation of the empowerment approach in marginalised Roma communities has a significant impact on increasing the independence and sustainability of clients. Social workers play a key role in facilitating this process, focusing on micro and meso levels of intervention, particularly in the areas of housing, financial literacy, and community planning. A notable finding is the lack of political support and systemic reliance on European funds, which limits long-term sustainability at the macro level.

These results suggest that empowerment at the community level can be an effective tool for social inclusion, provided that conditions for sustainable change are established, not only at the individual and community levels but also at the political level. Our research revealed that social workers must be supported not only professionally but also systemically to effectively contribute to the long-term transformation of Roma communities.

Author contributions

MK is the main author and takes responsibility for the design, conceptualisation, planning, data collection and analysis, validation, the writing of the original draft and the final approval. *MH* prepared the methodological part of the research: samples, data collection, analyses and reporting, and research ethics. *MT* contributed to planning, data collection and analysis, interpretation, validation, preparation, and writing the original draft and the final approval. *AH* contributed to planning, data collection and analysis, visualisation, and the final approval. *JS, KM* and *RKN* contributed to the methodology, planning, formal analysis, interpretation, validation, preparation, the writing of the original draft, visualisation, supervision, and the final approval. All the authors critically revised the manuscript.

Research ethics

The Ethics Committee of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra approved the study in February 2024 (UKF/73/2024/191013:001). Participants were involved in the research on a voluntary basis and could revoke their decision to take part at any time during the research. Following the participants' prior informed consent, their interview statements, including names, places, and localities, were recorded and anonymised. The audio recordings of the interviews were deleted immediately after the data transcription.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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