

Zekia Memedov has made a living from trash for as long as she can remember. Even as a little girl, she would rummage through trash cans instead of going to school, taking whatever she could then sell on. In later years, her children would do the same. Everyone in the family has to chip in, which leaves little time for school. And when they do go, the other kids turn up their noses at the scavenging children. »You smell! You have lice!«, they chant. But how are you supposed to wash if you don't even have running water at home?

Zekia is 47 and lives in North Macedonia, right in the heart of Europe. Like her husband Rahim, she is Romani, a European minority, most of whom are poor and treated as inferior by society. Until recently, Zekia lived with 50 other Romani people in a camp of tents and improvised shelters by the Vardar River on the edge of the capital Skopje. Husband Rahim grew up in an orphanage and is the only person in their community to have finished school. That earns him respect, even though he never went on to complete his training as an excavator driver. Zekia was 16 and Rahim 17 when their first son was born, and they later had six more children. Their home is full of objects they found themselves. Everyone in the camp washes and cleans their clothes with river water, and they eat what can be bought with the little money they earn. It's not enough, and it's not healthy, either. But their work allows them to do something good for the environment: They collect 80% of the trash that can be recycled. In countries that don't have

proper municipal trash separation, it's always the most deprived and marginalized in society who take on this thankless job and are despised all the more for it. But for many people, it's the only way they can get by.

It's early in the morning when the families leave, the men separately from the women, who take along their youngest children. Children aged 11 and above stick together in their own groups. They have bicycles with trailers and plenty of space for the sacks used to sort the trash. Zekia knows exactly when the people in Skopje's residential areas go to work, throwing their bags of household waste away as they leave. There is hardly any trash separation in North Macedonia: Glass, paper, plastic, food, diapers, toxic detergents – it all ends up in one container, and it's often children who clamber in to fish out the things that can be sold on. Where once it was cardboard, paper, glass, and metal cans, now it's mostly PET bottles. Whether Zekia and Rahim will collect cardboard and paper depends on the prices they can get for them on any given day. Often, it's not worth it. They discard plastic bags, which weigh almost nothing and don't bring in any cash. Packaging made of different types of plastic is also worthless.

It's dangerous, unhealthy work. Sometimes spray bottles explode. Other times they might turn up a dead dog in a plastic bag. If they cut themselves on some sharp glass or metal, they dress their wounds with a filthy rag. They are

exposed to toxic substances, as well as the flies, rats, and cockroaches that transmit disease. Many people who earn a living by collecting trash suffer from skin rashes, gastrointestinal illnesses, typhoid, and cholera. In most cases, they have no health insurance and limited access to medical care.

Since the trash collectors do something useful for the environment, the authorities call them »green« workers, but this isn't how they see themselves; for them, it's just a question of survival. Often, they cover 40 kilometers a day before handing in their pickings to a private drop-off center in the evening. They earn an average of 0.16 euros for each kilogram of plastic, while the drop-off center sells on that same kilo for three euros. Others also earn good money from reselling and exporting waste that can be recycled and help to reduce the use of valuable raw materials. A man can earn between eight and nine euros a day. Women, who need to take care of their children while working, often collect less and usually earn only around half that amount. This income level is below the poverty line.

Nevertheless, 3,000 of North Macedonia's two million people live on trash. There are also many waste collectors in South America, India, and the Philippines, but there they have now formed cooperatives that guarantee them a fixed wage, health insurance, and better working conditions. Cooperatives are also in a position to obtain loans

from banks and buy vehicles and machines that sort, shred, and compress waste. This allows the trash collectors to sell on waste without intermediaries and therefore earn more money.

The North Macedonian trash collectors don't have any schemes like this yet, but there are organizations helping them, for example by demanding that they be made permanent employees of recycling and disposal companies, which in turn would benefit from their knowledge of separating waste – after all, no one knows more about the waste produced in our consumer society. It would be good for the environment and also improve their quality of life.

With the help of an organization called Ajde Makedonijas, Zekia and her family were recently able to move out of the Romani camp and into a two-bedroom bungalow in a new estate. They have running water and medical insurance, and a social worker is available to answer questions they may have. Anyone who sends children to school receives a free meal every day, which is donated by grocery stores and restaurants. Zekia hasn't stopped collecting trash, though. It's her job, all she ever learned, and something she knows more about than almost anyone else.