



EARLY MARRIAGE PREVENTION NETWORK PROJECT

BULGARIAN

NATIONAL REPORT



The project “Early Marriage Prevention Network” is co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union





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INSTEAD OF A PREFACE

Bulgaria is a country of a culture, centered to adults, not to the child. Child and childhood traditionally are seen as a period of preparation to be an adult, not as a period of human life with its own importance, own needs.

When we talk about child-centered approach, we must understand that this is an approach based on children's rights and on recognition the fact that children do not live in isolation: they are part of the family and extended family, students at school, members of the society, local communities, and civil society in the country. In the context of different social systems, there are many factors that contribute to the respecting or lack of respecting of the rights of every child.

No approach to promote the development, protection and participation of children has been successful without taking into account the daily environment in which children live, to understand the strengths and weaknesses of this environment.

The objective of the Early marriage network project is to promote and raise awareness of the so called “child-centered approach”, concerning early marriages, especially in some Roma communities where the practice of early cohabitation is still presenting. There is no set definition of the child-centered approach in any national or European document that is why the consortium of the EMNP project approaches the issue of early marriages from child’s prospective, putting the interest of each unique child at the center of the child care. Decisions concerning the child should be taken with a view to his best interest and participation.

Child-centered approach should be applied in working with families and communities, to support their capacity to build a supportive, protective and respectful environment for children. All programs should be carried out with children in the context of their families and communities. The role of the environment in which the child develops is of utmost importance. To put a child at the center of our concern, it is appropriate to be able to assess how children are approached, based on rights - focusing on the Rights of the Child, and not to the needs of the environment.

Early marriages in the Roma community (the point is actually about cohabitation, family creation and not about “marriage”, because the legal act of marriage is not present or in most cases even not possible) is a topic, which is currently attracting the attention of the so called “general public” and “public opinion”. On the one hand, early marriages are often combined with “arranged marriages” and even “forced marriages”: usually it is the parents who initiate this form of cohabitation. Very frequently, this leads to “dropping out”, i.e. to early school leaving, which is related to limiting the further appropriate social realization of the person. Early marriages are usually followed by “early births”, because – at least with the traditional Roma families, as well as the marginalized ones) the married woman is expected to prove that she can give birth: she is



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highly appreciated as the continuer of the family and if she cannot fulfil this role, she has to bear one of the heaviest stigmas. Frequently, different forms of domestic violence, divorces, and diseases among these young mothers accompany early marriages, etc. Therefore, we could see a whole series of negative phenomena, to which any European society is (or at least should be) painfully sensitive. On the other hand, early Roma marriages seem out of the ordinary, exotic and inexplicable: a remainder of the “non-European marriage model” (typical for the people to the east of the Trieste–St. Petersburg line of John Hajnal). This “exotics” is often related to the stigmatization of the whole Roma community as a backward and unable for development generator of children. It is accompanied by the even more definite ignoring of the truth that, not so long ago, early marriages were typical for the majority of the nations to the east of Trieste–St. Petersburg line (and a little earlier – for all European nations), and by neglecting the fact that not all Roma groups, families and social strata practice early marriages.

As a result of the above, the public interest in early Roma marriages in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (as well as the rest of the countries where Roma people live) is sustainably high. This is usually related with the generation of many myths and stereotypes (buying and selling of young Roma girls, common practice of giving birth at 12 years of age etc.): they often result from the lack of information and the lack of surveys in this area; as well as by the acute lack of an adequate discussion (involving representatives of the Roma community). In all those situations, these myths and stereotypes do not help for the solution of the problem with early marriages.

The high public interest in a certain problem usually leads to the formation and implementation of a comprehensive policy for its overcoming, but this is not the case with early marriages in the Roma community: the relevant institutions are often passive and do not react because of the absurd excuse that this is “Roma tradition and Roma mentality”, and as a result a comprehensive policy on the issue is missing.

In contrast to the interest of the general public, a discussion on early marriages rarely takes place within the Roma community. Roma NGOs, formal and informal leaders and activists are avoiding this issue, because they are afraid that may enforce the stigma on the community, and often because of doubt, that they could oppose this practice. This is another barrier for overcoming early marriages and the accompanying negative effects of them.

We approached the issue of early marriages with the idea that they are not a primeval and unchangeable part of the Roma culture, they are not a question of specific “Roma” tradition and its overcoming will not endanger the Roma identity. Early family creation is a patriarchal, not Roma tradition: all people in their pre-modern development have created families at early ages. Moreover, the practice of early marriages has already disappeared within some Roma groups in the mentioned countries and that did not lead to their assimilation or depersonalization.



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We also approached the issue of early marriages with the idea that the Roma community should be an active participant in the efforts for overcoming this patriarchal tradition. Influencing the community only from “the outside” (through the relevant institutions, which remain “distant” and unrecognized by the community, through the law enforcement authorities etc.) is not sufficient and will not have any effect if the Roma community is not involved: through its informal leaders, through its educated representative, etc. This is not only an ethical and human rights issue but also a question of effectiveness.

PROFILE OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria is one of the countries with the most numerable Roma population. The exact number of the Roma could hardly be determined, because a large majority of them prefer to be declared as Turkish, Bulgarian or Wallachians at the population census. According to the census in 2001 370 908 people declared themselves as Roma, and according to the census in 2011 – 325 343 people, out of which 44.13% live in the villages. At the same time authoritative international and Bulgarian researchers determine the number of gypsies in Bulgaria of about 800 000 people.

Roma come to present-day Bulgarian lands at different times and from different places. That is the reason why today so many Roma groups exist, differing (more or less) from one another.

Due to the overall historical trends on the Balkans and in Europe, due to the history of settlement, development and relations of Roma community in Bulgaria with majority population and other minority communities, Roma in Bulgaria use different names to identify themselves. The term “Roma” was formally publically introduced immediately after the end of the WW II with the creation of the theatre “Roma” and the newspaper “Romano esi” (Roma voice) in 1946. The change of the state policy after 1956 and the prohibition for the minorities to use their mother tongue in public places lead to “forgetting” the notion until 1989. (Marushiakova, Popov 1993: 88 – 93) After the end of the totalitarian regime, the word “Roma” started to be used by the media, political circles and non-governmental organizations, due to the fact that the majority of the people with Roma identity have defined themselves in this way. That is also the politically correct way to call these people, without, of course, imposing on them another identity since there are two big groups who prefer to be identified either as Millet or as Rudary.

As mentioned above, according to the Census 2011, 325.343 individuals (4,9 %) are self-identified Roma. 85% report Roma as their mother tongue, 7.49% Bulgarian, 6.69% Turkish, and 0.82% other languages. 56.22% profess Orthodox Christianity, 32.24% Islam and



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approximately 12% are followers of the Protestants denominations.¹ Nevertheless, more than 60% of the Roma hide or deny their identity out of fear of discrimination or loss of social status and occupational/professional position. Generally, Roma identify themselves on the basis of three levels of identity: group, ethnic and national identity. At group level Roma call themselves as “Burgudjii”, “Bakardjii” and other group names. At ethnic level, they call themselves as “Roma, Millet or Rudari” (three different names for different communities). At national level, “Roma” have Bulgarian national identity. In addition, many Roma individuals are abroad for several months every year for temporary work assignments and they are consequently not registered by the census - distorting the actual numbers and percentage share of the population. Among the estimations, the highest percentage of Roma estimated is that of the European Council, according to which the Roma constitute 10.33% of Bulgarian population.²

Origin of the Roma people and their settlement in Bulgaria

Roma groups came first to Bulgarian lands during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. New groups of Roma settled with the arrival of the Turks in the next centuries. During the 17th and 18th century they were joined by Roma people fleeing from Wallachia and Moldova, who at that time had the status of "objects" rather than "persons", i.e. they were kept as slaves. Subsequently Roma migrated into Bulgaria from the territories of present Romania after slavery was abolished. The move was called in the second half of the 19th Century "the Great Kelderara invasion". Roma who settled in Bulgaria during that period were very different from the Roma who have lived from centuries in the Bulgarian lands. They speak a different dialect of Romanes language (called. "Vlach" dialects). Some of them speak an ancient version of the Romanian language and do not call themselves "Roma". Their religion is Eastern Orthodox Christianity playing an important role in their lives.

Roma were not sent to concentration camps during the Holocaust caused by the Nazi-regime. There were plans for deporting Jews but Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Bulgarian intelligentsia and even people from the ruling party opposed these plans and were not realized. During the War there were restrictions: for example there were food portions for everyone; the portions of Jews were 50%, the Roma received only 25% of the total.³

¹ *National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration*, 2012. Available at <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/page.php?category=125&id=1740> , last accessed: July 2015

² Krumova, Teodora and Deyan Kolev, authors. *Manual on Roma History and Culture*, 2013, 50-55

³ Krumova, Teodora and Deyan Kolev, authors. *Manual on Roma History and Culture*, 2013, 18-20, 35-37



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The Roma community in Bulgaria⁴

As mentioned above the Roma community in Bulgaria is not a homogeneous one but is compiled of a number of layers, meta-groups and sub-groups.

YERLII

The first in historical aspect is the meta-group of the so-called *Yerlii* – i.e. local, settled Roma. They are descendants of the Roma who came during the period from the 13th to the 18th century, and who gradually settled and for centuries on lived together with both Bulgarian and Turkish population. To a large extent the term *Yerlii* was introduced for popular usage mainly as a scientific point of view to summarize a large group of Roma, who settled at different times in the Balkans from the Middle Ages to the beginning of 19th century. A large part of the Roma themselves (except several subgroups near Sofia and Kyustendil) do not recognize the term *Yerlii*, and prefer the subgroup names or just *Roma /Gypsies*.

Yerlii divide themselves into two large groups: *Horahane Roma* (Turkish/Muslim Roma) and *Dasikane Roma* (Bulgarian Roma, Christians).

a) “Dasikane Roma”

Literally translated “**Dasikane Roma**” today means Bulgarian/Christian Roma. As a whole the word “das” in its original meaning meant “servant”, “slave”. The generalizing term *Dasikane Roma* identifies about 26 subgroups, speaking different dialects of the Balkan type of Roma dialects, with significant lexical influence from the local Bulgarian dialect. Dasikane Roma is the predominant Roma population in Northwest and some parts of Central North Bulgaria and approximately half of the Roma population in Southwest Bulgaria. These are for example *Burgudžiii*, *Dzhambazi*, *Tudzhari*, etc. Among them a slight tendency for Pro-Bulgarian behaviour can be observed, but some groups proudly preserve their Roma identity and traditions (for example part of the *Burgudžiii* in Shumen area call themselves “*parpul Roma*”- “*real Roma*”).

Specific subgroups with preferred other identity:

b) Grey pigeons

In Southeast and Central South Bulgaria there is a group of people, who the Bulgarians call “Bulgarian Roma”, the Roma call “Dasikane Roma”, and the Turkish call “*giaour chengenesi*”. They call themselves Asparuh Bulgarians or Ancient Bulgarians, and the neighbouring population often designates them as “Grey pigeons” or “Demirzhii”. The group inhabits a

⁴ Pamporov, A. *Romskoto vsekidnevie v Bulgaria* (Roma Everyday Life in Bulgaria), 2006; Center Amalipe. *Preventing Early Marriages*, 2011, 21-22





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relatively concentrated area along the Valley of Maritsa River with approximate boundary to the east – the town of Chirpan, to the west – the town of Pazardzik, to the north – Central Stara Planina Mountain and to the south– the Rhodopes Mountain. The Grey pigeons prefer intermarriages and avoid marriages with other ethnical groups within the country, except Bulgarians, as is their preferred identity. As a tradition the representatives of the group are members of the Orthodox Church, although under the influence of the Gospel Pentecostal Church in some villages a process of evangelization takes place. The peculiar for this group is that in some residential areas the mother tongue is Roma, while in others – traces of Roma language are completely absent. Nevertheless they recognize themselves as representatives of one and the same group and marry each other and the place of living determines also the language to be spoken at home.

c) **Tsutsumani**

In the three areas of Northwest Bulgaria lives a group of people, which the Bulgarians call “Bulgarian Roma” or “converted Roma” and the Roma designate as “Tsutsumani”. The Tsutsumani are Orthodox Christians, who Bulgarians do not accept as “real” Bulgarians, and the Roma do not accept as “real” Roma. Their mother tongue is Bulgarian, but they have several words with Roma origin in their language. In the general case the Tsutsumani do not live in ethnical separated neighbourhoods, but are dispersed among the Bulgarian population. They are considerably better integrated than the rest of the Roma in the region – the size of the households, the educational level and the unemployment level are similar to the ones of the Bulgarians in the respective area.

d) **“Horahane Roma”**

Literally translated **“Horahane Roma”** means today Turkish/Muslim Roma . Horahane Roma are the predominant Roma population in Northeast, Southeast and Central South Bulgaria and approximately half of the Roma population in Southwest Bulgaria. Horahane Roma are the most numerous Roma group in Bulgaria. They profess Islam mixed with numerous Christian elements, and their holiday system includes not only Bayrams, but all significant Christian holidays – St. George’s Day (Erdelez), St. Basil’s Day (*Bango Vassilii*), St. Todor’s Day, St. Ivan’s Day, even Christmas and Easter. They speak *Romani* mixed with a number of Turkish words, and some of them use Turkish language together with Romani language. Horahane Roma are divided into number of subgroups. For example *Basket-makers*, *Tinsmiths*, *Drandari (Musicians)*, etc. In the course of time these internal group differences have faded up and today the larger majority of Horahane Roma are a uniform group, which keeps only a distant memory about the former craft and subgroup division.



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Specific subgroups with preferred other identity:

e) Millet

In the regions where Horahane Roma live, there are groups of people who call themselves “Millet”. The Bulgarians usually designate them as “Turkish Roma” or “Roma with preferred Turkish consciousness”, the Turkish call them “Millet chengenesi”. The Romani-speaking Roma have dubious attitude and some accept them as Roma, others consider them Turkish. Although the census of the population they declare themselves as Turkish, the name they use for themselves is *Millet*. “Millet” is a Turkish word, which can be best translated as “ethnos” or “religious community”. During the time of the Ottoman empire the minority Christian population was divided into *Millets* in terms of religion – for example Orthodox, Judeans, Armenians (not in the ethnical meaning of the word, but in the religious one, as long as the Armenian Church differs from the Eastern Orthodox). The only *millet*, which was divided in an ethnical principle, was the gypsy one – *Chengene Millet*. The Turkish themselves did not use the word “millet” when referring to themselves⁵. Part of the gypsies, who called themselves “Millet” used also the name “Turkish gypsies”, but categorically deny being called “Roma”. For them Roma are only the Christians who speak Roma language. The mother tongue of the Millet is Turkish, but in some residential areas the older generations use Roma language as “a secret language”, and in other groups the usage of a small number of Roma words is preserved as a slang.⁶

f) Agupti

In the region of the Rhodopes Mountain lives a group of people, which call themselves and is called by the others Agupti. In the middle of XXth century they were classified as Gypsies based on a fragment of a folk song: “Turkish captured Rada,/ and then made her Agupti/ Agupti – a black gypsy...”. But Agupti are a wonderful example of change of the initial group identity with the preferred Turkish identity within several generations. If in the middle of XX century researches register Egyptian identity combined with “clear ancient Rhodopi speech”, at the end of XXth century the Agupti differ showing tendency towards inclusion in the surrounding Turkish population and usage of the Turkish language. A decisive factor in this case is probably Islam. Similar to the Millet, the usage of the Roma language is as a “secret” language, used by the older generation.

⁵ It is only since 20 century, after the Kemalist cultural revolution that the word “Millet” began to be used regarding Turks yet, not in its ethnic or religious meaning, but in its social meaning – as a synonym of “people’s”.

⁶ Kolev, D., T.Krumova. *Za identichnostta na Milleta* (About the Millet Identity). 2005



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KALDARASHI

The second large Roma meta-group in Bulgaria are the so-called *Kaldarashi*. They come with "the big Kaldarashi invasion", initially passing through Austro-Hungary and Serbia, as a result of which they are often called "Hungarian Gypsies", "Austrian Gypsies", "Serbian Gypsies" or "Nyamtsuri" (i.e. German Gypsies). They are divided into two large groups - *Bakardzhii* and *Lovari* (from the Hungarian "lo" - "horse", due to which they are known as "horse stealers") and into many subgroups.

The Kaldarashi is one of the best preserved Roma groups in Bulgaria. They still have potestarian forms preserved – such as the Roma court - *meshere*, they speak mainly Romani, they strictly keep their customs and traditions. The lavish way in which they celebrate Easter (Patragi) and St. George's Day, as well as Kaldarashi wedding ceremonies often points them out as one of the most interesting Roma customs in Europe. The Eastern Orthodox Christianity plays very important role in the life of the Kaldarashi and they are devoted Christians.

Until the middle of 20th century they were nomads, who travelled from village to village to sell their goods. They settled down after the promulgation of Decree 258 of the Council of Ministers dated 1958, prohibiting "nomadism and begging in the People's Republic of Bulgaria". In absolute numbers they are not many. But in territorial aspect Kaldarashi live in all country regions, they rarely form large neighbourhoods, more often several families settle in a village together with the other population but without mixing with the other Roma .

The number of the Kaldarashi in Bulgaria is about 30 000.⁷

RUDARI / LUDARI

Groups of people which the neighbouring population calls "Romanian gypsies" live predominantly in the village regions of Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Nova Zagora, Burgas, Varna, Dobrich, Veliko Tarnovo and Pleven areas. The representatives of this community call themselves "Rudari" or "Ludari" – depending on the local dialect. Due to their specific crafts, the surrounding population knows them as Kopanari (whittlers) and Mechkadari (bear-tamers), for which their words are respectively *Lingurari* and *Ursari*. During the census and the sociological researches the Rudari/Ludari identify themselves usually as Romanian, Wallachians or Bulgarian, but they always insist on being differentiated from the Roma . Usually older generations accept the name "Romanian gypsies" for them, because the words *tsigán* and *tsigánka* mean respectively "husband" and "wife" in their speech (as by the way is the meaning of the words *rom* and *romni* in Roma language). The Rudari / Ludari speak a dialect of the Romanian language. In Bulgaria there are two dialects – north (more influenced by the standard Romanian) and south (with more

⁷ Krumova, T., D.Kolev, G.Daskalova – Tsvetkova. *Sbornik materiali "Preodoliavane na tradicionnite I novi anti-romski stereotipi* (A Collection of materials "Overcoming traditional and new anti-Roma stereotypes"), 2011.



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distinct influence from the Greek language). Although they live in relatively differentiated ethnical neighbourhoods, they are probably the best integrated Roma group in the Bulgarian society in relation to the level of education, employment rate, as well as the size of the households, in which they do not differ from the Bulgarian population in the certain residential areas. The number of the Rudari in Bulgaria is about 70 000.⁸

ATTITUDES

The majority and other ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities cultivate negative stereotypes towards Roma communities. Amalipe conducted in 2011 a representative survey among teachers, social workers and health professionals.⁹ A majority of medical doctors, teachers and social workers consider Roma as lazy and irresponsible, susceptible to commit crimes. Consequently, they cannot be trusted. On the question: “Who are the Roma and what are their characteristics?” following answers were given:

Medical doctors		Teachers		Social workers		Comparative National survey	
criminals	40.1%	criminals	46.1%	Uneducated	43.3%	Larcenous	46.3%
dirty	39.0%	lazy	42.6%	Criminals	40.7%	Lazy	23.4%
lazy	36.6%	uneducated	32.4%	Dirty	37.1%	dirty	15.4%
uneducated	32.1%	dirty	25.8%	Lazy	34.5%	liars	11.2%
liars	26.5%	musical	25.4%	many children	27.3%	gypsies	9.6%
irresponsible	10.8%	liars	21.9%	Liars	23.2%	uneducated	8.6%
tricky	9.4%	irresponsible	19.1%	Irresponsible	18.0%	poor	7.7%
poor	9.1%	revellers	15.2%	Music	16.5%	revellers	6.5%

⁸ Krumova, T., D.Kolev, G.Daskalova – Tsvetkova. *Sbornik materiali “Preodoliavane na tradicionnite I novi anti-romski stereotipi* (A Collection of materials “Overcoming traditional and new anti-Roma stereotypes”), 2011.

⁹ Kolev, D., T.Krumova, A.Pamporov, D.Radulescu, S.van der Zwaan, T.Balcik. *Beyond Anti-Roma Stereotypes: the World is not Just White and Black*. 2013



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ill-mannered	8.7%	many children	11.3%	ill-mannered	13.4%	insolent	3.7%
musical	8.0%	knit together	11.3%	Poor	12.9%	tricky	3.0%

SITUATION OF ROMA IN BULGARIA

EDUCATIONAL STATUS

Roma in Bulgaria are the most disadvantaged group in regard to education. The table below shows the school enrolment of Roma children in %

School enrolment up to class 4:	male 30.7%	female 38.7%
School enrolment up to class 8:	male 42.9%	female 37.1%
School enrolment up to class 12:	male 15.7%	female 4.1%
University enrolment in %:	male 0.5%	female (less)

(National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (2012-2020)).¹⁰

There has been only a slow improvement of Roma educational achievements in the last 20 years. Different reasons can be accounted for that Roma children do not go to school or drop out from school:

- Low level of education of parents and their lack of understanding the value and importance of the education for the future prospects of their children;
- Some harmful traditions as early marriages which turn especially Roma girls into school drop-outs as early as the age of 12
- The recent situation of high unemployment even among well-educated youth which demotivates Roma parents to encourage their children to go for education
- Socialization patterns in many tightly knitted Roma neighbourhoods that create group obligations and additional difficulties to break out for an individual educational benefit
- Unfavourable school environments, like discriminatory attitudes of teachers and non-Roma fellow students
- The school remains an alien to Roma as no social or cultural Roma elements are communicated. Roma history and traditions are not reflected in text books

¹⁰ National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration, 2012. Available at <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/page.php?category=125&id=1740>, last accessed: July 2015



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- Frequent labour migration of parents resulting in high rates of school absenteeism.
- Lack of motivation and disinterest of students

Official measures in place to enforce compulsory education/facilitate school enrolment/prevention of drop-out include:

- legal obligation of children in the school going age (age 6 to 16) to attend school free of charge
- recently adopted legal provision to stop social support to parents whose children in obligatory school going age are not in school
- additional assistance schemes for socially weak pupils (it concerns all children at school age and not only minorities or specifically Roma students)
- the National Program providing free breakfast for all children from 1 to 4 grade.
- provision of free transport for the kids from villages that have no school
- children who study in focal point schools are provided full day schooling, free lunch and free transportation

At the same time, the adult illiteracy among Roma is the highest compared to other minority groups in Bulgaria. For civil society actors, adult illiteracy is an especially important indicator as illiterate parents cannot assist their children in school homework and often do not put much importance on the education of their children.

Another serious problem preventing Roma from equal access to quality education is school segregation. The successful integration of Roma children into the national system of education needs a balanced class representation of majority and minority children, enriching all with intercultural competence. Even though this ideal could not be achieved in the primary education of remote rural regions with a high concentration of minority groups; it could be supported and achieved in secondary or higher education provided as a rule in bigger villages and towns with more diverse population. In actual fact, the number of Roma students transferred from segregated to desegregated schools constantly grows. Preventive measures for reducing the number of Roma school drop-outs are in place and the Roma children get more and more integrated into the national system of education. Still, some negative tendencies regarding the formation of 'secondary segregated schools' can be observed when Roma students move or are moved to a certain school and gradually become a majority there. Then non-Roma parents of students start to move their children to other schools under the prejudice that many Roma students in a class will lower the quality of education. Over the years such a school could turn into a secondary segregated school. Often a rumour about lower quality of provided education due to many Roma children is spread among the majority and other minorities and thus qualified teachers also start to move to more prestigious schools.

With regard to the value of education of Roma parents, there are four types of Roma families:



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- Traditional families do not perceive education as a strong value. They do not obstruct the education of their children but on the other hand, they not proactively support their schooling and education
- Modernized families are strongly interested in the education of their children and make sure that they are in school
- Marginalized families often stop their children from attending school in order to engage them in income generation activities
- Conservative families pertain to cultural reasons that are used to justify Roma socialization without schooling. Patriarchal habits and early marriages would prevent the girl child to attend school.

With regard to specific Roma communities:

- The conservative Kaldarashi Roma community still does not perceive education as a strong value. Most of the elder generation of this community never attended school or has completed only 2-3 grades. The majority of the middle generation improved to a certain extent: usually men have completed at most 8 grade (in order to obtain driving license). Women dropped out without completing even primary stage. Among the youngest Kaldarashi primary education is not an exception, although dropping out is still prevalent. Some of the boys continue in gymnasiums but usually leave the school after 1 or 2 years. The Kaldarashi female student who graduated gymnasium and after this did her degree at Veliko Turnovo University is an exception to be mentioned. To summarize, there are some positive changes but they are slow and not sustainable; good education is still an exception.
- The Horahane-Roma group is somewhat different. Their educational attitudes are one generation ahead compared to Kaldarashi: the middle generation (both males and females) has primary education completed and diploma obtained. Many of the youth continue in high schools, especially the boys. There is understanding among the parents that education is important

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

At present, 36% of Roma define themselves as unemployed out of which 11.4% are officially registered with the Directorate of Employment Agency (DEA) and 24.2% are not registered. Data on territorial segments indicate that the number of unemployed Roma in North Bulgaria is significantly higher than in the Southern region (BRqu, A11.1). Findings of sociological surveys conducted in 2010 and 2011 indicate that the Roma (un-) employment has cyclical nature in Bulgaria. The employment rate is lower in the winter and higher in the summer. The average employment rates for the analysed period are 31%. The seasonal nature of the Roma employment rate is easy to explain, taking into account that the two main occupational arenas employing



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Roma community members are agriculture and constructions. During the last two years there has been a significant decrease of employment in the constructions industries.

Most of the Roma labour emigrants leave their families and their children in Bulgaria with negative consequences for the schooling of children. In a resolution of the European Parliament in March 12, 2009 the fact was outlined that that children left at home by labour migrants experience a general lack of care with reduced physical and mental health, passivity in schools and non-participation in education. At times malnutrition and even abuse of unprotected children is reported. Usually young Roma labour migrants initially leave their children in the care of their parents and relatives.

The employment rate among Roma women is very low, only 23.6%. This is due to the fact that Roma women take care of children and home. About 60.5% of the young women living in the urban areas and 69.3% of the older women are not employed.

HEALTH STATUS

Roma share similar situation in the field of healthcare. A World Bank initiated study compiled and analyzed available data on Roma mortality in Eastern Europe concluding that life expectancy of Roma throughout Eastern Europe is about 10 years less than that of the overall population (Ringold D, Orenstein MA, and E Wilkens 2005). According to this study, the average life expectancy of Bulgarians is 73.5 years. Whereupon, the average life expectancy of Roma people in Bulgaria is approximately 63.5 years. According to data of the National Statistics Institute of Bulgaria from 2001, barely 5% of the Roma people reach retirement age (Open Society Institute: 2008). According to a survey carried out among 498 women in seven different Roma communities in Bulgaria in 2012, 52.2% of the participants were not health insured, 47.1% did have a health insurance and 0.7% did not know their health insurance status (Kolev, Baev, Boyanova, Tarnovo 2012). 21.68% of the participants say that the primary care physician refuses to pay house visits when needed. Another indicator related to the access to primary and secondary health services in the same survey shows that 30.12% of the participants felt discriminated by medical personnel. 36.5% say that their children do not attend annual health check up by a physician. The survey shows that the access to emergency health care is very poor. 37.75% say that an ambulance would take up to 30 minutes to reach the patient. According to 11.04%, it takes an hour or more for an ambulance to reach the patient in need. Some 4.01% stated that the emergency room refuses to send an ambulance. Focus group interviews showed that the reasons for refusal of emergency care are due to either the lack of health insurance of the patients or the fact that they live in Roma community. The Bulgarian law on health states that the



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emergency care is free of charge regardless of the ethnic origin or the health insurance status (Kolev, Baev, Boyanova, Tarnovo 2012).

EARLY MARRIAGES IN BULGARIA

At present marriages in the Roma community have several specifics which need to be noted down since they are related to early marriages in one or another way. Some of them are not legally recognized, but have their historical parallels in number of societies, including Roman law as well as the Bulgarian traditional culture until the middle of the 20th century.

- Today the custom of “*bride-buying*” is characteristic mainly for the most conservative Roma groups - the Kaldarashi, Burgudjii and Thracian Kalaidjii, among which it is the main form of marriage. Bride-buying is still seen in some of the subgroups of Horahane, Dasikane and Millet Roma, where it is already in a process of transformation and disappearance. Although we talk about “bride-buying” and “brides’ market”, the essence of this problem is not actually buying the girl, but rather buying her “honour” – the right of the boy to take her virginity and the right of the boy’s family to associate the future children with their own kin.¹¹ That is why the custom of “bride-buying” is closely related to the girl’s virginity – requirement which is still very strong in Roma communities, especially the groups mentioned above. The “ransom for the bride” is not a “price” but dowry given as compensation to the girl’s family for its loss, when she leaves her home to be married. And because amongst ethnic groups with patriarchal social organization the woman belongs to the kin of her father, the compensation has to be paid to that kin; after the wedding the girl becomes part of her husband’s kin, just like the children who are considered part of the „man’s kin”.

However, the results from a number of ethnographic and sociological studies among Roma in Bulgaria show that the buying of brides has a negative effect in terms of marriage age and early/forced marriages as a whole. In some local communities after the first menstruation the girl is suspended from school in order not to “be deceived”, i.e. to lose her virginity. The fear that the girl could meet a boy and have sexual intercourse before her marriage make the parents marry their daughters at a relatively early age. Since girls at this age are still children and do not know “what is good for them”, the parents choose the marital partner – usually amongst boys, whose parents have also decided that it is time to get them married¹².

- The custom of “*elopement*” or “*bride-stealing*” is another phenomenon connected with marriage and establishing a family. In the common case it is characteristic for these Roma groups, amongst which the custom of buying brides is in process of dying down or has already been overcome. The elopement or bride-stealing is initiated by the lads– in most of the cases it is

¹¹ Pamporov, A. *Romskoto vsekidnevie v Bulgaria* (Roma Everyday Life in Bulgaria), 2006

¹² Pamporov, A. *Romskoto vsekidnevie v Bulgaria* (Roma Everyday Life in Bulgaria), 2006





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a result of mutual consent between the two young people, but it is also possible that it is just the lad's initiative. In these groups the elopement is most commonly related to an attempt to avoid the partner chosen by the parents, which also affects early marriages.

- A specific way of traditional marriage for Roma is related with a preliminary engagement – *nishan*.

In this case the payment is rather symbolic. The core element in the tradition is an important sign (“*nishan*”) which the boy's family gives (a ring, a bracelet, earrings). With this type of marriages again the parents negotiate the conditions – when the young couple is going to get married, where they are going to live, what the size of the dowry is going to be, etc., but this is usually done after they have discussed it with the young people. In many cases it is the young who initiate it – they like each other and then ask their parents to arrange the marriage relation and the *nishan*.

This type of marriage can be quite often observed with many of the subgroups of Dasikane Roma, Harohane Roma, Millet, as well as some Rudari, for which „bride-buying” has faded away as a tradition. Usually these are the groups which practice „elopement” as well. Just like the previous two types of traditional marriages, this one also has the risk of forced marriage – especially for the girl and, of course, this has a negative effect on the early age for the first marriage, too.

More and more Roma families are created by the judicially legal *civil marriage*. For groups and families, which are modernized at a higher level, the civil marriage is observed in a degree not less than the one of ethnical Bulgarians. According to the survey, implemented by Center Amalipe in 2015 in the district of Veliko Tarnovo 26.67 % of the respondents share they have official court marriage. At the same time almost half of the married respondents declare that they are living together without any kind of marriage. However, the in depth interviews carried out give us enough reasons to consider that most of these answers refer to a community type of marriage (which is not always considered traditional) but still there is a ceremony although partly modernized.

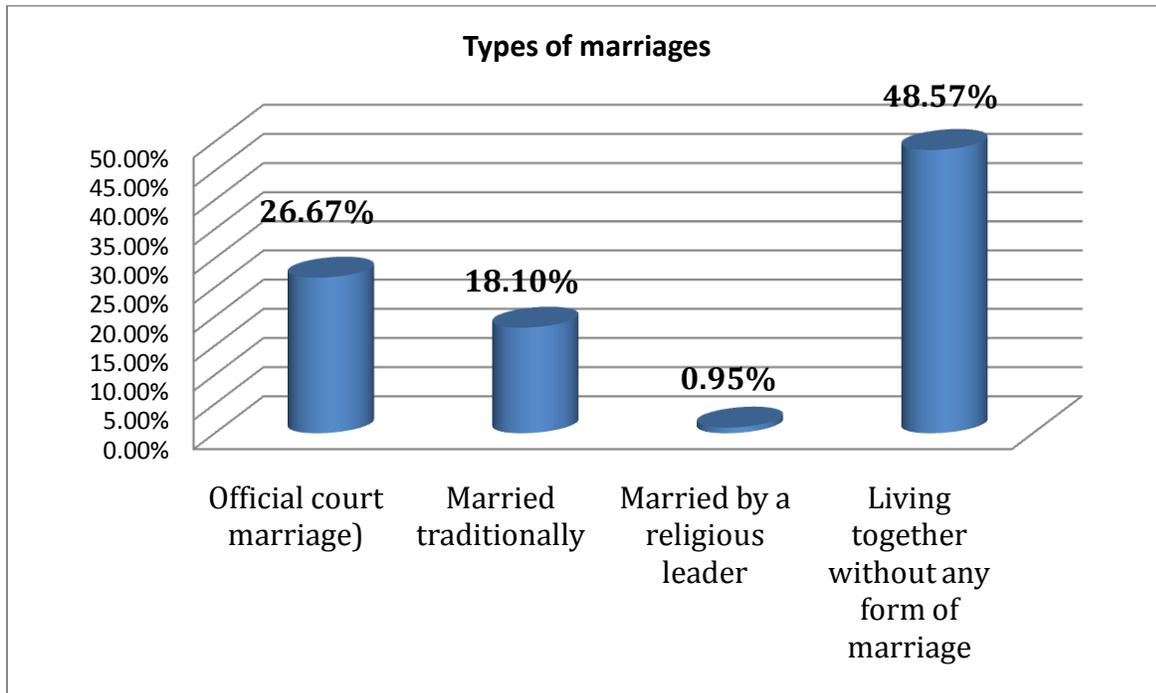


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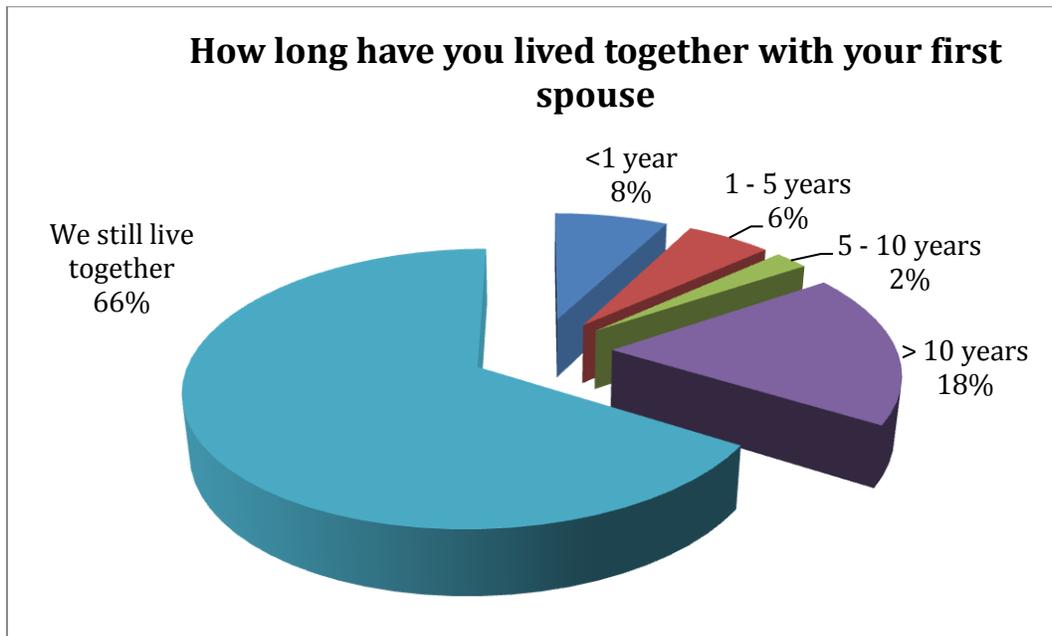




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On the basis of the survey, we can make the conclusions that marriage/cohabitation in the Roma community from the region is quite stable since more than 2/3 of the interviewees (66.16%) claim that this is their first marriage and they are still living with their first spouse.



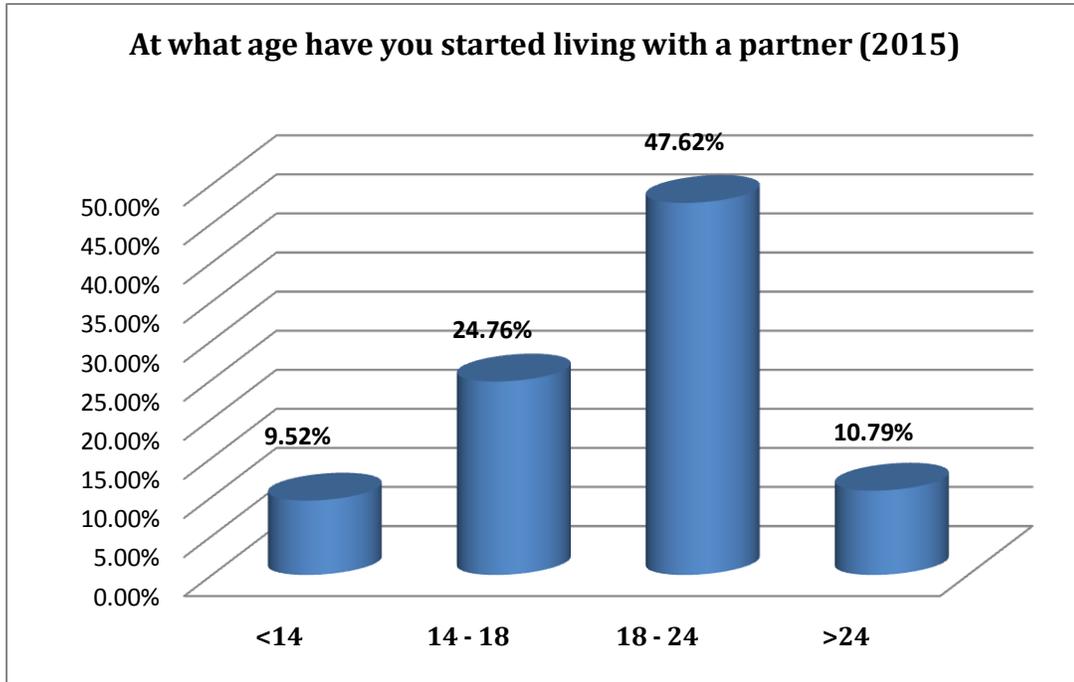
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The age of starting a marriage/ cohabitation presents an interesting phenomenon. The survey confirms the tendency already traced by previous studies for raising the year of starting a cohabitation. The research carried out by Center Amalipe in 2010 outline the age of 18.4 – 18.8 average year for starting a cohabitation, while the most common age is 17.¹³ The survey carried out in 2015 not just confirms this tendency but shows clear increase in this direction. 47.62 % of



the respondents pointed that they have starting living with a partner between 18 and 24 years old; while the previous survey showed that at the age of 18, the share of persons in cohabitation with a partner is 50%. On contrary, the present survey shows that just 34.29% have been married by the age of 18.

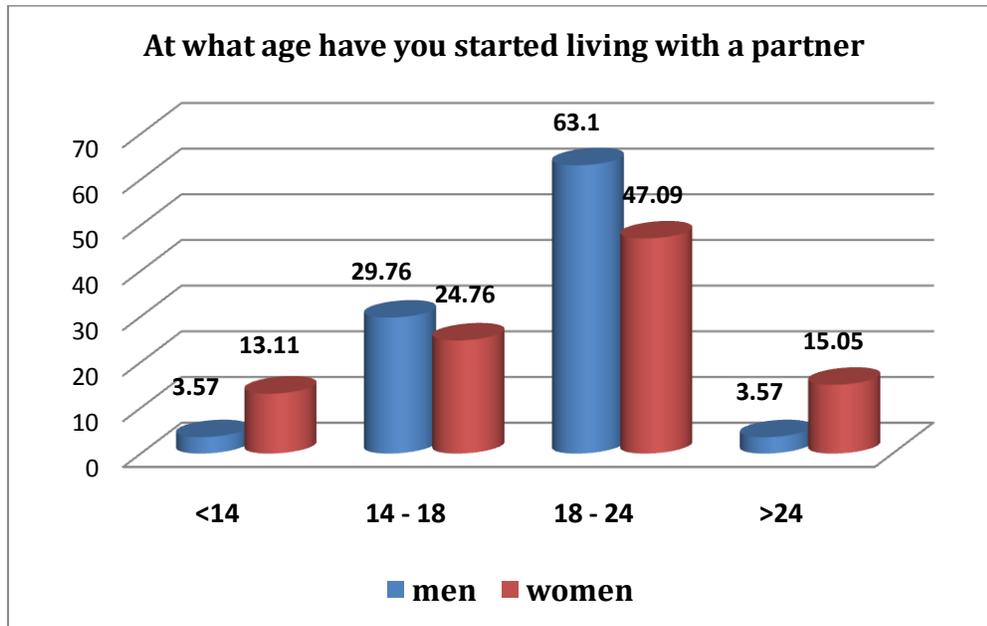
One can expect to see a difference in the situation of men and women; the survey justifies this. 13.11% of the women vs. 3.57% of the men get married before the age of 14. We can see also a big gap in the age group 18 – 24 years.

¹³ Center Amalipe. *Preventing Early Marriages*, 2011





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At the same time, the perception about the age of marriage existing in the Roma community points towards a slightly earlier age of starting a family. The diagrams below show the difference between the perception about the marriage age and the real age when people start to live with a partner. This difference is probably a result of the stereotypes about marriage existing also in the Roma community. Often the myth spread among the majority population “Roma always get married early: this is their tradition” reflects back in the community: “We can’t change our traditions: we get married early”. Nevertheless, the results from the 2015 survey show that traditions are indeed changing and that the modernization process is happening quicker in reality than in our minds.

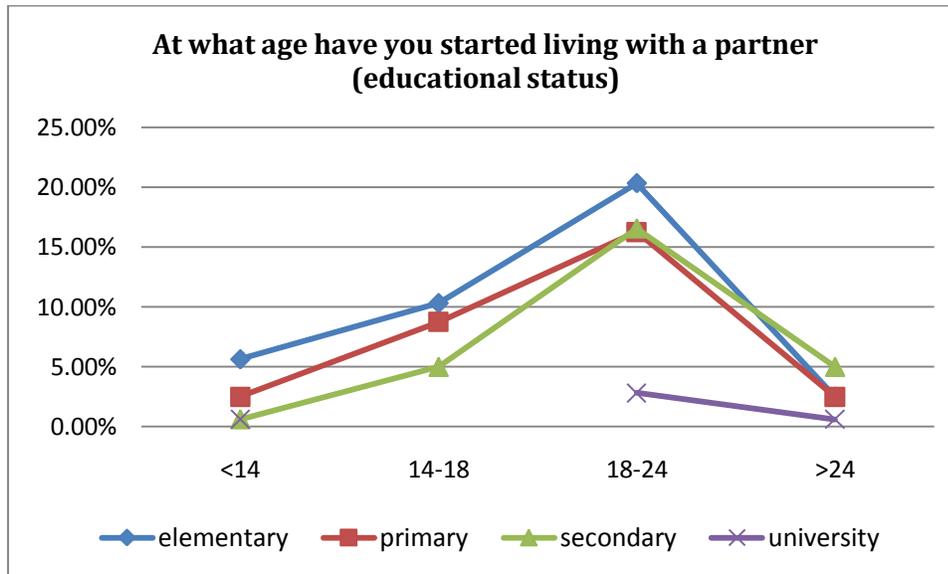
Clear pattern however can be seen regarding education and early marriages. The educational level of the respondents is the most significant and distinctive factor for the early start of informal cohabitation and marital life. The increase of the age of first cohabitation and first marriage is in direct correlation with the level of education. The higher the educational level is, the later marital and non-marital partnerships start. 60 % of the people with elementary or non-completed elementary education start family before the age of 14 and 81.31% of the people who have been married by the age of 18 have elementary or primary education. On the contrary, almost 40% of the people who have married after turning 18 (37.56%) have completed secondary education or higher.



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As explained above, the Roma community in Bulgaria is not homogenous. Within the community there are subgroup divisions with significant differences in religion, language, self-identification, traditional art-crafts, calendar and family feasts and other cultural traditions. There are also group differences regarding the children and family planning. As a national representative survey done in 2010 showed, the subgroups division affects meaningful phenomena such as type of households, cohabitation and marriage, etc.¹⁴

The Roma population in Veliko Turnovo region is composed by a big variety of Roma groups. The survey was done in a way to cover most of them. As a result, it recorded not only the common features shared by almost all Roma groups and local communities but also the specific ones that could be found only among certain groups and places.

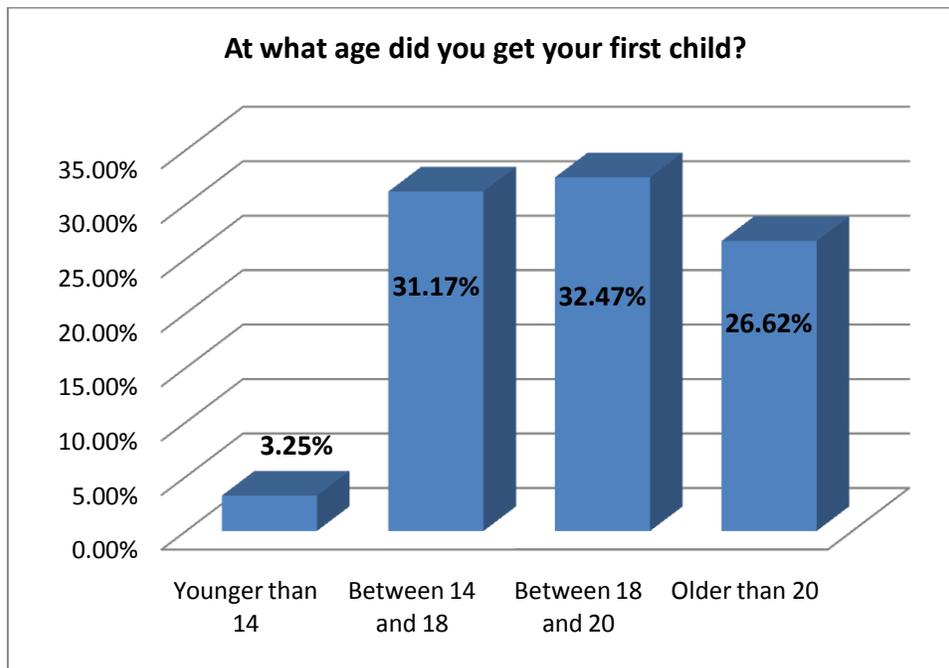
Regarding early marriages the survey revealed the following features:

1. Age for getting first child and first grandchild: the survey clearly shows that nowadays the early births are not predominant trend among Roma in Veliko Turnovo region any more while the extreme early births are exceptions. The majority of Roma who have children reported during the survey that they have got first child above the age of 18: more than 59 % (more precisely, 32,47 % at the age of 18 – 20 years and 26,62 % above the age of 20 years). Less than one third, or 31,17 % reported that they have got first child at the age of 14 – 18 years, while 3,25 % had extreme early birth below the age of 14.

¹⁴ Center Amalipe, *Preventing Forced Marriages*



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Similarly to the average number of children, the age for getting first child is linked with group differences. Early births are exceptions among *Dassikane Roma* – 12,5 % of them have first birth between 14 and 18 years while no case of extremely early birth (below 14) was registered. The huge majority of this group – 87,5 % - is giving birth after 18. Among *Rudari* extremely early birth was not registered too and the early births are slightly below the average for Veliko Turnovo region – 31,15 %. More than two thirds of *Rudari* – 68,85% - is giving birth after 18. Among this group the biggest share – 42,62 % - is having first child after the age of 20.

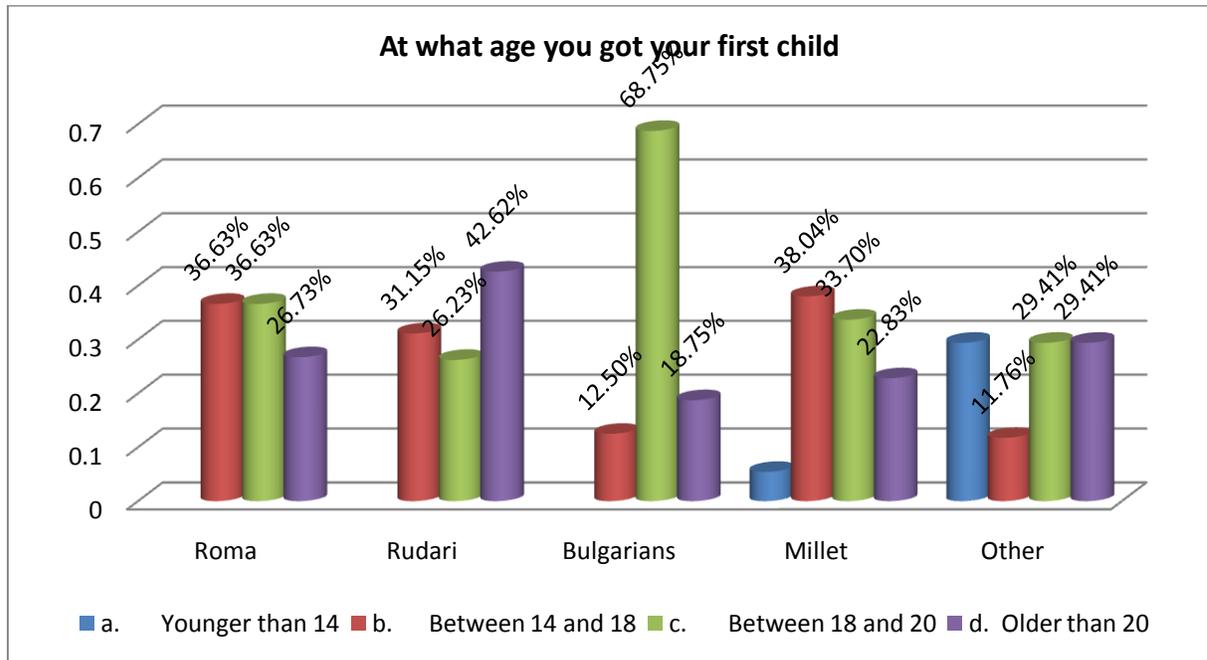
More than 63 % of respondents from the groups who self-identified themselves only as *Roma* have also reported first birth after the age of 18. Early births are also significant share (almost 37 %) but not predominant one. The lowest age for first birth was registered among *Millet*: almost 57 % of them have first child after 18 while more than 43 % - below this age. Among *Millet* group the extremely early births are also above the average for Veliko Turnovo region – 5,43 %.



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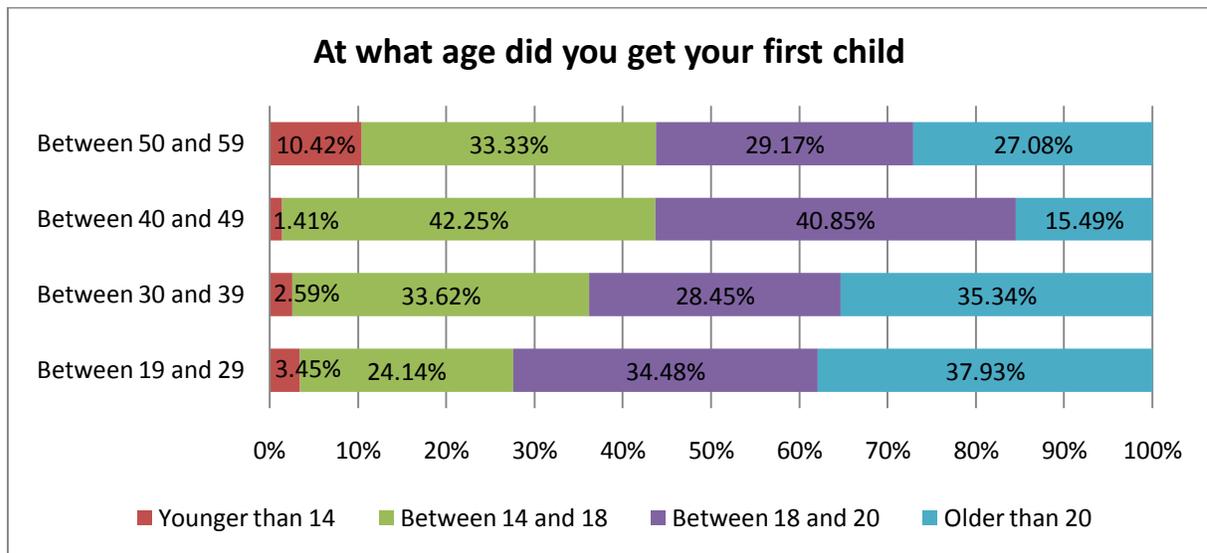
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The tendency for increasing the age for first birth could be observed when comparing the respective percentages among the respondents from different age groups. As younger the age group is as bigger is the share of respondents who reported first birth after 18: from 56 % in the groups above 40, through 63,76 % for the age group 30 – 39 to 72,39 % for the younger Roma aged 20 to 29 years. Not surprisingly, the share of births after 20 also increases among the younger age groups.



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The fact that most of Roma in Veliko Turnovo region have got their first child at age above 18 and the tendency for increasing this age sharply contradict the widely-shared public stereotype for “early Roma births” as well as certain media publications that try to impose the image of extreme early birth to all Roma people. They also confirm the sustainable trend for modernization among Roma community in Veliko Turnovo region and Bulgaria as a whole.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP

As mentioned above a key value characterizing the Roma community in Bulgaria is the purity of the girl before marriage. Therefore, the first act of cohabitation is *de facto* considered starting a family. At the same time, within the Roma community, the official act of marriage has low importance according to community perception for establishing a family. According to the survey, most of the respondents (48.57%) consider people living together a family, no matter whether they have official marriage or not. At the same time an interesting tendency among the Roma from Veliko Turnovo region is raising the percentage of official marriages and decreasing the importance of community marriage ceremony.

The typical forms of marriage amongst Roma are not legally recognized by the macro society without the presence of a civil act. In the years of the socialist regime, the unregistered cohabitation was constantly criticized. Nevertheless, after 1980 many of the Roma in Bulgaria contract civil marriage not because of external pressure, but because of the significantly high “wedding loan” granted, which gives them an opportunity for an independent start by buying a house, furniture and a car. The data from the conducted in 1992 and 2001 censuses of the



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population confirm this. In each age group of 25–39 years old about 86% of Roma women have contracted civil marriage, while in the age group of 30–39 years old approximately 90% of men have contracted civil marriage, i.e. despite the early factual start of family life in unregistered cohabitation in the middle age groups, is observed a significantly high level of legitimate matrimony, typical for the other ethnic groups in the country as well (Pamporov, 2006).

No matter what the real situation is, a sustainable tendency in the attitudes of people is the statement that 18 year old is the reasonable age for getting married.

The positive trend in changing attitudes can be very clearly traced when comparing the data from 2010 and 2015. We can see that in 2015 the most significant difference is perceiving the age of 18 as a minimum for starting a family life or a sexual relation.

The survey from 2015 confirmed that:

- 68,63% disagree that the parents should decide whom their child should get married
- Around 50 % of the respondents believe that the girl (or both the boy and the girl) should elope if she doesn't love the man she has to marry with, if they do not have the permission of their parents or the parents of the groom do not have the money asked from the girl's parents
- Around 60 % disagree that the parents should ask for money from the groom's side if their daughter is a virgin before the marriage

BULGARIAN LEGISLATION ON CHILD PROTECTION, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY ISSUES

The Bulgarian legislation prohibits marriage below the age of 16, and between the age of 16 and 18, marriage is allowed only with the consent of both adolescents and parents. In this respect, Bulgaria does not differ from most European countries.

LEGAL CAPACITY AND EXERCISE

Children under 14 years of age do not have legal capacity – a recognized by the law ability to express legally relevant will. Their actions or inactions do not bring forth legally valid result. For them and on their behalf legal actions are performed by their legal representatives – parents or guardians and trustees. The law presumes that in this period a person has not reached the appropriate degree of maturity that enables him/her to realize and guide his/her actions through which he/she would obtain rights and undertake obligations.



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Children aged 14–18 are minor. This period is a transitional age when mental and spiritual maturation takes place, which allows them to exercise rights and obligations in a limited way. The acts of minors are legally relevant if performed with the consent of their parents or guardians.

PENAL LAW

The Penal Code defines the legal age of consent for sexual intercourse – completed 14 years of age. Sexual intercourse with a girl under 14 years of age is considered a crime, regardless of whether the child has willingly participated or not. Upon completion of 14 years of age the law protects the child from unwilling sexual intercourse through the requirement to understand “the nature and meaning of the act”.

Crimes against youth are directly related to the tradition of arranged marriages. A person who, by abusing his parental power, compels a child of his, who has not accomplished 16 years of age, to live connubially with someone, is subject to punishment. Connubial life between an adult and a girl under the age of 16 is also considered as a crime. Inciting and facilitating such connubial cohabitation is also subject to punishment.

The marital ransom is considered a crime only if given for a girl under the age of 16. A parent or any other relative that received the ransom and allows his daughter or relative under the age of 16 to live connubially with someone is subject to punishment.

An important aspect is that, in case between the victim and the perpetrator is contracted marriage before the execution of the punishment or closing of the court investigation, no penal responsibility is borne. Thus, serious crimes are compensated if marriage is contracted between the perpetrator and the victim.

On the other hand, for every crime punished by imprisonment of less than 5 years, an agreement with the prosecution office may be contracted and then a punishment below the prescribed minimum will be imposed. Thus, the replacement of heavier punishments with much lighter ones becomes possible even in the absence of exclusive or multiple extenuating circumstances. Most of the crimes related to early/forced marriages fall into this category.

CIVIL LAW

The provisions of the Family Code stipulate that only civil marriage, contracted in the form prescribed by the Code, creates the effects which the law relates to marriage. Thus, not only the different religious and culturally determined rites and practices, but the newly established “cohabitation” does not bring forth any valid legal consequences. *Marriage can be contracted*



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only under the mutual and free consent between an adult man and a woman, given in person and simultaneously before the appointed official in the given municipal administration.

By exception of the general rule, a legally recognized marriage is possible with a person at the age of 16¹⁵ only if important reasons impose this. In order to contract the marriage, a permission of the Regional Court is required.

According to the law, relations between spouses are built on the basis of mutual respect, common care for the family, understanding and fidelity. These personal relations between spouses are presumed to exist in the different forms of factual marriage, as these are the expected aspirations of two people who have decided to create a family. However, there are some peculiarities related to the consequences of legally recognized marriage, from the effects of which the couples, who have not contracted marriage, cannot benefit – privileges related to the order of inheritance, right to alimony, rights over the family residence, or on the belongings obtained during the marriage and others.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

In 1989 the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁶. This is an agreement between countries which undertake to implement and enforce the guaranteed children's rights. CRC is the fastest and most widely ratified international document in the history of human rights. By 2009, the Convention has been ratified by 193 countries.

Bulgaria ratified the Convention in 1991 and it became part of the domestic law of our country.

Children's rights are human rights. The Convention changed the way of looking at children - it calls for children to be treated as human beings with clearly defined rights, not as passive objects in need of care.

The Convention contains 4 groups of rights:

- rights of protection - protection from the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose, sexual abuse, child labour
- rights of services - the right to health care, right to education, right to play

¹⁵ *De lege ferenda* in the part of the survey examining the theoretical treatments of the issue one could find a reasonable opinion that each marriage, where one of the parties is a person under 18, should be referred to as an early marriage, and often as a forced marriage.

¹⁶ *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, New York, 20 November 1989



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- participation rights - the right of information, right to be heard, right of coalition
- other rights - child relationships in the family, society and the state

In Bulgaria, a child is considered anyone under the age of 18 years. Special Law on Child Protection regulates child safety and ensures compliance with its Rights. This law protects the best interests of the child to allow it to grow and develop in the best possible environment. The best interests of the child mean: health, education, his need to feel safe and protected.

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Law on Public Education require every child or adolescent aged between 7 and 16 to study in a school in the public education system, as for the indicated age attendance is only in the day form of education. For non-attendance of school are envisaged sanctions and penalties for the parents. The LPE prohibits married people or young mothers to study in the day form: they can study only in the evening or distance forms, provided they have completed 16 years of age. Thus, one of the first institutions that would establish the presence of an early marriage is the school: a situation that corresponds to the actual events, since almost in all cases an early marriage is related to leaving school (“dropping out”).

Every child (an individual under the age of 18 years) has the right to protection for his/her normal physical, mental, moral and social development and protection of his/her rights and interests. An obligation of every citizen, who becomes aware of a child in need of protection, is to report immediately to the Social Assistance Directorate, the State Agency for Child Protection or the Ministry of Interior. This obligation also applies when such information is obtained in the course of exercising a profession or occupation, which is bound by professional secret. The report may be submitted to the Social Assistance Directorate in an oral or written form or through gathering information by the social workers in the Directorate. The social worker examines and evaluates the reported case by collecting the necessary information from the family, the child, the school, nursery or kindergarten, the specialized institution, the relatives, friends and neighbours, other Social Assistance Directorates, the General Practitioner and any other sources as necessary. The term for the data collection and evaluation of the reported case is 10 days from its submission to the Social Assistance Directorate. In case there is sufficient information of threat to a child, the social worker opens a case. The term for the evaluation of the case is 4 weeks from receiving the report in the Social Assistance Directorate. Based on the information gathered on the case, an action plan is prepared, which includes a long-term aim and short-term objectives, activities for its implementation and measures for protection. This plan is implemented by the Social Assistance Directorate and is subject to monitoring through periodic meetings with the child and his/her parents.

- o ***THE FUNCTIONS OF CHILD PROTECTION, ASSIGNED TO THE MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL POLICY*** are to direct, coordinate and control the implementation of the state social policy for families and children; to assist and encourage



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the collaboration with civil society organizations for their active participation in the process of formulation, implementation and monitoring of the policy on child protection; to direct, coordinate and control activities to encourage and support responsible parentage; to direct, coordinate and control the development of draft acts, strategies, programmes, action plans and reports in the area of demographic policy, family and children.

- **THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR** is obliged to provide police protection of any child through the specialized bodies of the Ministry of Interior; to participate in the implementation and control of the specialized protection of children in public places; to exercise control with regard to children crossing the Bulgarian state border.
- **THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE** has the responsibility to ensure the security of children in state schools, kindergartens and supporting units in the system of public education; through the regional institutions of education (RIEs) to ensure the interaction with the management of specialized institutions and social services – residential type, to establish the educational needs of each child and provide an adequate training; to implement activities for the prevention and solution of the problem with students not attending school; to participate in the implementation of the special protection of children with talents.

The functions with regard to child protection are assigned to most of the rest ministers: of culture, foreign affairs etc.

- **MAYORS OF MUNICIPALITIES** ensure the application of the state policy for protection of the child in the municipality and coordinate the activities for child protection at the local level; provide the security of children in municipal schools, kindergartens and supporting units; undertake measures for ensuring the security of children in the structures and units on the territory of the respective municipality; support and encourage the collaboration with local civil society organizations in order to ensure their active participation in the process of formulation, implementation and monitoring of child protection policies.
- **THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE DIRECTORATE** is responsible to implement the current practical activity related to child protection in the municipality and present proposals to the municipal council for a municipal child protection programme; determines and applies specific child protection measures and controls their implementation; to undertake checks on complaints and reports of children's right violations and present obligatory prescriptions for their removal under the conditions and procedure, established with the rules for the application of the law; to provide advices and consultations on the upbringing and raising of children; to provide information for the services offered and render support and assistance to families and parents of needy children; to compile and maintain up-to-date registers for several groups of children, among which:



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- a) children in need of special protection;
- b) out-of-school children.

The Social Assistance Directorate (through the municipal Departments for Child Protection) should also receive direct reports of early marriages. Actually, often this is not happening: on one hand, there is resistance on behalf of the community towards bringing out such cases “in open”, while the Social Assistance Directorate is not recognised as an “inside” for the community institution. On the other hand, the Social Assistance Directorate and Departments for Child Protection are not active in considering such issues on their own initiative. Their reaction to reported cases cannot always be defined as adequate: usually it includes only formal checks or a prescription for the child to be hosted in an institution, which is obviously not a proper solution for him.

Regional planning of social services, 2010 and the prevention of early marriages

In 2010 in Bulgaria was undertaken a strategic planning exercises of social services for the next 5 years (2011 – 2015) in accordance with the new requirements of the Law on Social Assistance (LSA) and in the Regulations for its application (RALSA). The changes obliged all regional administrations to develop and approve regional strategies for the development of social services by involving in the process all stakeholders that are relevant to social services and/or the policies for social inclusion.

With the methodical and technical assistance of UNICEF, the process applied the model of planning with participation, tested by UNICEF in 2009 in three pilot regions – Ruse, Vidin and Pernik – where the regional strategies were adopted by the end of March 2010. For this reason the scope of the participants was significantly wider than the regular practice – both in profile and number of people. Participants in the process were regional administrations, municipalities, local structures of Agency for social assistance (RDSA and DSA), service providers, NGO, organizations and structures of the state power in the other sectors that are related with the social policy (e.g. education, healthcare, employment, housing, infrastructure). Participants in the planning process were also representatives of the Roma community from local and national NGOs, health mediators, Roma experts in municipal and regional administration.

Center Amalipe, as a part of the consortium of the project “Preventing Early/Forced Marriages” supported the incorporation of the topic for the social services in the Roma community and early marriages into the regional strategies in three ways. First, the issue was raised during a meeting of the National Coordination Council of the project. It was also raised in front of the partners from the National Association of Municipalities. Second, the team encouraged the coordinators that organize local campaigns for the prevention of early marriages to take an active part in the elaboration of the regional strategies and to envisage activities with proven effect during the local campaigns. Third, concrete recommendations were developed (applicable at national level). The



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recommendations were sent to the team of UNICEF which supports and coordinates the elaboration of all regional strategies.

For the first time in Bulgaria was carried out such a major strategic planning process with broad participation countrywide: the 25 regional operational teams involved 211 people; in the planning process in these 25 areas under one form or another were involved about 2100 people, out of whom 1388 are participants in major regional working groups and more than 700 participated only at municipal level (the established regional groups in 229 municipalities involve about 1570 participants) or thematic groups in the areas of the strategy.

Finally, the quantity indicators for achieved results were entirely satisfactory. To December 2010, in 26 of the 28 regions, regional strategies for the development of social services for 5 years (2011– 2015) were approved – in those three pilot regions and 23 strategies in the remaining regions.

The provision of access to services for the groups at risk from the Roma community was highlighted as a factor with crucial importance for the successful prevention of the risks and for the effectiveness of the regional strategies in the overcoming of the consequences from the social exclusion.

Along with the general desire for improvement of the access, the regional strategies envisage more concrete measures for coverage of the Roma with regard to the following services, where a significant part of the target groups are Roma:

The launch of the Programme “Early prevention for “closing the entrance” for abandoning newborns at maternity hospital level”. Such programmes or centres for early prevention of abandoning were envisaged under different options as mixed intersectoral innovative services at regional level in most of the regional strategies. A key goal of such a programme is to provide support for the children and the families from communities at high risk, prevention of early marriages and early motherhood, improvement of the skills for good parenting. In their action plans, especially is provided the organization of a network for the coverage of the prospective mothers at risk from all municipalities in a programme for early prevention. A special attention is paid to the mobile work for active search of prospective mothers in communities at high risk in order to conclude, register and observe the pregnancy, and in case of a risk of abandoning – social activities and on-site consultation for the prevention of child’s abandoning. The involvement of the health mediators and the centres for development of vulnerable communities for collaboration and mediation in the search and consultation of young Roma mothers is envisaged.

In those strategies that do not plan a particular programme/centre for early prevention of abandoning (as Veliko Tarnovo and Varna), those activities are assigned to the centres for public support or to the centres for family consultations.

The Centres for Public Support (CPS) have to cover as a network all municipalities/villages. For this purpose, almost all regional strategies intend to build a mobile component of the activity



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– mobile teams of CPS, which could deliver the service directly to the children and the families at risk who live in remote villages, including the Roma neighbourhoods.

Establishment of CPS and family consultation centres inside the Roma neighbourhoods was envisaged in some of the regional strategies – e.g. Varna (two new CPS in the Roma neighbourhoods of Varna and Provadia). In the region of Shumen was envisaged to open a new CPS in the municipality of Veliki Preslav that would have a special focus on vulnerable ethnic communities in the neighbouring 2 municipalities.

Involvement of specialists with Roma background as staff in providing the social services. Many of the regional strategies put an emphasis on the necessity for attracting and employing social workers and specialists of Roma background in the existing and the newly opened CPSs in order to facilitate the work with Roma children and their families (Pernik, Haskovo, Plovdiv, etc.).

Offices or programmes for family planning for covering the Roma communities were planned as a mixed health and social service in almost all of the regional strategies.

School for teachers and family consultation, activities for the development of skills for responsible parenting among Roma youth before setting a family (e.g. in the regions of Sofia-city, Ruse, Plovdiv, Kardjali, Lovech, Pleven, etc.).

The Social Educational Professional Centre (SEPC) is another service that is planned in some of the strategies (Burgas – continuation of the activities of the SEPC in the village of Bata and opening a new SEPC in Pobeda neighbourhood, Bourgas; Kyustendil – Opening of 2 new SEPCs). According to the RALSA, the SEPC is a complex of social services, targeted at professional training of people with certain level of decreased labour ability, aged 16 or more, and for children at risk who are 16 years of age or more. The local partners in the regional planning are looking for options for integration and provision of professional qualification of the young Roma, but they have to be careful for overcoming/decreasing the risk of institutionalization through accommodation in SEPC.

The review of the regional strategies through the lens of the access to services for the Roma community shows that there are social services that are important for the excluded from the Roma community groups, but no particular measures have been discussed for covering the Roma groups at risk. This is a situation in the services for children and people with disabilities such as the centres for social rehabilitation and integration (CSRI), day centres for children and people with disabilities. Obviously such steps have to be planned during the implementation phase of the regional strategies and in the action plans on municipal level. An exception are the centres for early intervention in case of disabling, planned in almost all regional strategies where a significant mobile component is envisaged, also for covering the segregated Roma neighbourhoods.

Within the **horizontal policies and measures for social inclusion in the relevant sectors** (education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure) is also intended to cover the groups at risk from the Roma community. Taking this fact into consideration, we should bear in mind that large part of the Roma activists and leaders have some knowledge mainly in the areas of the targeted



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horizontal policies and are not very familiar with social services. For example, most of the activists that have conducted local campaigns for the prevention of early marriages put the emphasis on the measures related to education (prevention of dropping out, literacy, “second chance” schools, improving the access to secondary school, etc.), and healthcare (sexual and reproductive health, drug prevention, etc.). It is not a coincidence that most detailed and concrete are those measures in the area of education and to some extent in the area of the healthcare:

- In the programs for prevention of dropping out from school and reintegration in the educational system of dropped out children and young people are described in almost all regional strategies;
- In the initiatives for literacy and education for adults as the “second chance” school, intended in the strategies in some regions (as Sofia-city, Veliko Tarnovo, Vratsa, etc.);
- In the municipal and regional programmes for health prophylaxis of motherhood, family planning, support for improvement of healthcare for children from families at risk.

Centres for development of vulnerable ethnic communities and mediators

The targeted measures and activities for social inclusion and developing vulnerable ethnic communities, envisaged in the regional strategies include the following:

- Centres for development of vulnerable ethnic communities with special focus on the Roma, planned as partnership activities between municipalities, NGOs, providers of social services.
- Mediators from the Roma community – health mediators, labour mediators and/or teacher assistants.

After the example of the pilot 16 out of 28 regional strategies is planned the establishment of **Centres for development of vulnerable ethnic communities** for work mainly for the improvement of the access of the Roma to social, educational, health and other services. We have to underline that this is barely enough: a necessity of similar centre is obvious in almost all regions; moreover, even in the mentioned 16 regions the centres cover just some of the municipalities. The innovative character of this service and the fact that it is unknown for the wide circle of specialists, and especially for the Roma activists, are among the reasons such Centres not to be included in the planning in the rest of the regions. Hopefully, over time, once those Centres are established and show their effectiveness, similar centres will be opened in the other regions.

How would the centres function? The centres for development of vulnerable communities with special focus on excluded groups from the Roma community are intended to be a municipal activity, implemented through public-private partnership between municipalities, NGOs, local leaders. The centres could be established as an NGO activity in collaboration with the



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municipalities and to begin their functioning with project-based funding from the operational programmes. Those centres will work with the direct participation of local NGOs or/and initiative groups, informal leaders – representatives of the local Roma communities, employed experts in ethnic and demographic issues at municipal and regional level, health mediators and teacher assistants for the Roma community. The form and the structure of the centres will be chosen depending on the local conditions and the existing experience in municipal administration and civil sector. The options for functioning are different:

- Municipal activity with the support of local NGOs, local formal and informal leaders, initiative groups from the Roma community;
- Roma or non-Roma NGO initiative/project – for development of marginalized communities with the support of the municipality;
- Within the frames of a social service, envisaged in the RALSA, which is not an activity delegated by the state and is being realized with the support of the municipality and an NGO such as the service of family and consultative centre.

Activities and role: The centres work with vulnerable communities and groups mainly in the segregated neighbourhoods in the urban areas and in rural villages with compact Roma population where the access to social services, healthcare, education and employment is difficult. Special input for prevention of early marriages and improvement of the child care in the families with underage parents is expected by the teams of these centres, as well as the initiation of a wide range of activities and functions, targeted at social inclusion.

Preparatory activities include the establishment of teams, premises and equipment, training of the teams implemented by an NGO with experience gained from programmes for development of Roma community and programmes for social inclusion. The centres would be set close to the segregated Roma neighbourhoods, but out of them, in order to prevent secondary isolation/segregation of the Roma community and to encourage the integration processes and social inclusion. (It is possible to use premises in municipal buildings, community centers, centres for work with children, etc.).

The “full” range of activities and tasks for such centres (as described in the regional strategy of Vidin and approved during the pilot stage) includes:

- Each centre will start its activity with a survey on the concrete problems and needs of the Roma communities where it will use the door-to-door approach for the collection of data for the situation and the social status of the vulnerable families and the children that live in segregated Roma neighbourhoods, as well as living in mixed areas.
- Mediation between Roma people at risk and the institutions (such as the local authorities, Labour Offices, Social Assistance Directorates, etc.), provision of information and support for access to employment, education, social services, health care, administrative services and etc.;



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- Assisting the Centres for Public Support in working with vulnerable Roma families and children at risk,
- Implementation of integrated programmes for community development through stimulation of initiative, participation and self-support, funded on a project principle;
- Educational programmes for overcoming the functional illiteracy among the adult population in the Roma community and professional qualification;
- Health education, prevention of addictions for children and adults.

For the final design and the initiation of such centres, the local partners in the regional planning rely mainly on the active participation of Roma and non-Roma NGOs that have experience in community development.

The regional strategies that were approved on a later stage include additional elements. The Region of Montana envisages the establishment of a centre for prevention of dropping out from school that will work mainly among the Roma communities in the region. The strategies also include the existing Centres for Community Development, initiated by NGOs and working with direct project funding – such as the Centre in the town of Lom (Center of Roma-Lom foundation) and the intergenerational house for children and families in Stara Zagora (managed by World without Borders Foundation).

Health and social centres for the Roma community: In some of the regions (Varna, Sofia, Plovdiv, etc.) this range of tasks and impact is being assigned to the health social centres for the Roma community that are established and functioning under the Programme of the Global Fund and the Ministry of Health for Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS.

Employing mediators from the Roma community:

Health mediators:

A shared opinion of the participants in the regional planning exercise was that the most important problem that should be resolved with priority is the appointment of health mediators. 25 out of the 28 regional strategies envisage employing health mediators for improving the access to healthcare in the Roma communities at high risk, and in the segregated neighbourhoods in particular. The health mediators have specific tasks for access to information, consultation and mediation for access to health care. However, it is necessary to develop their potential for working on prevention of child abandoning and neglecting of children from the Roma community, as well as on the issues of prevention of early marriages: it is not a coincidence that some of the most successful campaigns within the project “Preventing Early/Forced Marriages” were implemented by health mediators (Peshtera, Tundja, etc.).

- Selection and appointment of health mediators in the municipalities with compact Roma neighbourhoods – continuation of the activities of the health mediator in the municipality of Vidin and employment of at least 6 new health mediators in the region.



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- Provision of basic training for the health mediators, follow-up consultation, training through practice and supervision.
- Provision of health and mediation services and consultation by the health mediators; involvement in the work of the CPS with the families at risk for prevention of child abandoning and neglecting of children.
- Organizing immunization campaigns for full coverage of children from vulnerable communities in the compulsory measures for immunization. The campaigns may be organized at municipal level (locally) by the health mediators, the centres for development of vulnerable communities and NGOs, with the support of the GPs, Regional Healthcare Centres, hospitals. The campaigns include: review of the situation of the compulsory immunization of children from Roma communities; meetings of health mediators with parents for provision of information and overcoming the distrust towards the requirements for mandatory immunizations; additional immunization by the GPs in accordance with the age and the health condition of the children. Regular immunizations are a precondition for improving the health status of Roma children and for their access to early education through enrolment in kindergarten.

Labour mediators are planned in half of the regional strategies, but their number is not specified in all of them.

Public policies for preventing early/forced marriages in the Roma community

Actually, in Bulgaria there are no specific public policies for the prevention of early marriages in the Roma community. This type of activities is considered mainly in the context of promoting the welfare of the child and the protection of the child: as described above. On the other hand, the issue is sometimes raised in the context of the whole policy for Roma integration.

The targeted policy for Roma integration in Bulgaria dates back to the late 90s and was strongly influenced by the efforts for the accession of Bulgaria to the EU and NATO. On 22 April 1999 the Council of Ministers adopted a *Framework programme for equal integration of Roma in Bulgarian society*. It was followed by the *Strategy for educational integration of children and students from the ethnic minorities – 2004*, *Health strategy for disadvantaged people, belonging to ethnic minorities – 2005*, *National programme for improving the housing conditions of Roma – 2006*. In addition, Bulgaria was one of the co-founders of the initiative *Decade of Roma Inclusion* and in 2006 approved its Action Plan for the initiative. The documents related to Roma integration were partially updated in 2010: in May was adopted the updated *Framework programme for equal integration of Roma in Bulgarian society, 2010–2020*, and in March – the



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updated the *Strategy for educational integration of children and students from the ethnic minorities*.

The analysis of these documents strikes with the fact that the issue of early marriages is not explicitly included. It is even not discussed in the context of the topic of the Roma woman, which is not so popular either. Thus, a section on the Roma woman was included in the Framework Programme from 1999 without discussing the issue of early marriages. In the updated Framework Programme (May, 2010), this section dropped off entirely.

Against the background of the existing problem with early marriages among a considerable number of the Roma in Bulgaria, this fact is surprising and speaks of a lack of understanding on the part of the institutions of the necessity of targeted actions for solving the problem with early marriages, as well as of the lack of a comprehensive dialogue on the issue inside the Roma intelligence and community. The negative stereotypes, promoted by some of the most influential media, regarding the early-births rate of the Roma, emphasise in addition the unwillingness of many Roma activists to take up the issue of early marriages.

PRACTICES OF INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AND CROSS-SECTORAL COOPERATION RELATED TO EARLY MARRIAGE PREVENTION

Attitudes of social workers and field workers

Within the framework of the project *Preventing Early/Forced Marriages*, implemented in 2010, in Bulgaria was conducted a survey on the attitudes among social workers, representatives of the Social Assistance Directorates and Departments for Child Protection on the territory of the whole country. The survey was conducted with the active collaboration of the Agency for Social Assistance and the State Agency for Child Protection. Over 230 social workers filled in the questionnaire. The survey focused on the following main questions: How do social workers see the extent of spreading and causes for early marriages in the Roma community? How do they react in such cases? What should be done to overcome the problem with early marriages? How do they assess the existing programmes in that direction? A similar survey was conducted among teachers and school principals.

The results from the survey indicated that more than 50% of the social workers pointed out the problem of early marriages as “typical for Roma” and as “conditioned by the community”. Thus, they have justified the impossibility for effective intervention in these cases. In addition, many of them stated openly their negative, almost discriminative attitudes towards the Roma community:



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it is lead by “local chieftains” and “Roma women give birth as if having a bowel movement”¹⁷. It is hard to expect from a social worker with similar attitudes to work effectively in the community for solving or preventing this phenomenon.

A similar survey and focus groups with teachers revealed a bit different motivation for non-intervention in the cases of early marriages. Many of the teachers stated their willingness to help in such cases: “Until yesterday we were teaching these children and we are emotionally bound with them”. However, the larger part of them considered that the solution of a case like that was practically impossible and their efforts were useless: “The parents are hypocritical. They tell us they won’t marry their children and on the next day they bargain them, take the money and nothing can be done.”¹⁸

Regarding the necessary steps to be taken for overcoming the problem with early marriages, the field workers (both social workers and teachers) expressly stressed upon the need of more serious administrative sanction. The survey conducted among representatives of the Departments for Child Protection and Social Assistance Directorates revealed that over 85% of the respondents point out that the legislation should be amended and cohabitation between an under-aged person and a minor (the common practice of Roma “marriages”) should be incriminated, i.e. to be deemed as crime. This has been pointed out as a key step in solving the problem.

We should again underline here, that a number of provisions in the Penal Code of the Republic of Bulgaria stipulate that cohabitation between an under-aged person and an adult is a criminal offence. This is a crime of general character and the lawsuit is lead by a prosecutor, without a need of formal complaint filed by the injured person. Facilitating and inciting to such cohabitation is prosecuted under the same procedure. Therefore, this measure was introduced long ago but its effect can be assessed as negligible.

Regarding the effectiveness of the public policies for preventing early/forced marriages, the majority of the field workers point out that these do not exist or fail due the poor interaction. More than 90% of the interviewed 230 representatives from the Departments for Child Protection and the Social Assistance Directorate indicate that there are no concrete programmes, action plans or activities targeted at the prevention of early and forced marriages. The most frequent answer of the representatives of the social institutions is that they face this problem, when early marriage is already a fact and most often the minor or under-aged Roma mother is looking for social assistance or child allowances from the Social Assistance Directorate. The interviewed

¹⁷ The quotations are from the conducted interviews, pointing out the most indicative examples for the existing attitudes.

¹⁸ The used answers are from a school, teaching Roma children from a community, in which the practice for paying a dowry “babaak” has almost disappeared.





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teachers also emphasised the lack of interaction with other institutions, as well as the fact that representatives of the Roma community do not approach the institutions and do not provide assistance in solving the cases of early marriages.

Local campaigns for prevention of early marriages: motivated activists – organized groups and communities

In the period of June–August 2010 were conducted campaigns for the prevention of early marriages in local Roma communities in 10 municipalities on the territory of Bulgaria. The purpose of these campaigns was to appropiate a few types of activities in Roma communities pertaining in general to social and community work and to examine the effect of these activities on the prevention of early marriages. The activities within these campaigns reached more than 3500 people, living in 18 villages and towns.

Participants

The campaigns were initiated and organized by local Roma activists, coming from or/and working in the relevant communities. This was in coherence with the major approach, undertaken with the implementation of the project “Prevention of Early/Forced Marriages”, implemented by Center Amalipe in Bulgaria, that focuses on the construction of an “internal community perspective” in the efforts for overcoming the traditional practices as early marriages, forced marriages etc. It turned out that even among the most conservative Roma groups in Bulgaria (such as the Burgudjii and the Kaldarashi) as well as in small and detached settlements in rural regions one can identify educated Roma boys and girls, that have not cut off their ties with their communities but on the contrary – are strongly motivated to work for change.

The engagement of this type of Roma activists, who are not social workers and are not part of the system of local institutions, in performing social and community work has its own challenges. On one hand, it requires the investment of efforts for increasing the knowledge and skills of these activists: at least in the sphere of community work, social activities, the specifics of interpersonal communication, etc. And on the other, it requires additional efforts to persuade the representatives of local institutions to “recognize” these activists as their reliable assistants and partners in the Roma community. Furthermore, it requires a lot of efforts so that these activists can be recognized as an authority (i.e. “taken seriously”) by their communities. Despite these challenges, the involvement of local Roma activists is a necessary precondition for the establishment of an internal community perspective in the fight with early marriages and the



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accompanying negative practices. It turned out that educated boys and girls with the appropriate support and cooperation not only provoke a serious discussion in the community on delicate matters related to marriage and family, but also assist the organization of the community and its involvement in overcoming a whole spectrum of negative traditional practices.

The project team had its strategy how to meet these challenges. For increasing the skills in organizing social and community work, as well as for provision of needed assistance, within the framework of the campaigns were conducted three workshops with the activists, carrying out the local campaigns. In order to familiarize the local institutions and their involvement with the campaign activities were conducted trainings with social workers, teachers and Roma leaders from the municipalities involved in the project. Certainly, the pointed out challenges were overcome to a great extent by the activists, as within the campaign they had to reaffirm their authority in Roma communities, to win the trust of the institutions and attain new knowledge and skills.

Scope

The local campaigns were implemented in municipalities representing the three major types of settlements, inhabited by the Bulgarian Roma – a village, a small town and a large city. The campaigns were carried out in one of the largest and emblematic of Roma neighbourhoods – ghettos (Nov Pat in Vidin and Nadezhda in Sliven), in Roma neighbourhoods in the towns of Vratsa, Rakitovo, Rakovski, Kuklen, Perushtitza, as well as the villages Kardam (Popovo Municipality), Zavoy, Hadzhidimitrovo, Veselinovo (Tundzha Municipality), Momino Selo, Chalakovi, Belozem, Shishmantsi, Striama (Rakovski Municipality), Nefela (Vratsa Municipality), Vodoley (Veliko Tarnovo Municipality). This diversity allowed the examination of the effect of similar activities implemented under different conditions: it turned out that part of the activities were effective only in the conditions of a village or a small town, but not in a large Roma neighbourhood, etc.

According to data from the population Census conducted in 2001, self-identified as Roma/Gypsies in Bulgaria are 370908 people. Many researchers indicate that the real number of the Bulgarian Roma is between 700 000 and 800 000 people¹⁹. Almost half of the Roma (47%) live in rural areas, over 20% in small towns, and the other one-third – in large (regional) cities. This diversity of conditions is in contrast with other countries with predominant Roma population (Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary): the large number of the Roma in these countries lives in rural areas.

¹⁹ Елена Марушиакова, Веселин Попов. Циганите в България. София: Клуб 90, 1993; Liégeois, J.P. Roma, Gypsies, Travellers. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1994.





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The local campaigns included also representatives of different Roma groups. From the most conservative and traditional (as the Kaldarashi in Popovo municipality and the Burgudjii in Rakovski Municipality) through different groups and subgroups of the Yerlii Roma (as Christians and Muslims) to the Turkish Roma from the group of the Millet: in practice the campaigns were realized among all large Roma groups where early marriages still exist²⁰. This allowed taking into consideration the specifics in the application of a significant part of the activities in different Roma groups: it turned out that a part of these activities is not applicable to some of the Roma groups, while with others they have good results, etc.

Ethnologists differentiate many Roma groups and subgroups in Bulgaria as the major ones are: “Yerlii” (the term is introduced by researchers in order to designate the sedentary for centuries in Bulgarian lands Roma opposed to the Nomads) with its major groups “*Horahane Roma*” (Roma Muslims) and “*Dasikane Roma*” (Roma Christians) and many other subgroups; “*Kaldarashi*”, “*Rudari*” (Romanian speaking Roma) and “*Millet*” (Turkish speaking Roma). The conducted sociological survey indicated that early marriages are most often spread among the *Kaldarashi*, the *Millet* and part of the *Yerlii* (especially with those living in large urban ghettos and isolated villages).

In different settlements according to the local specifics the campaigns were implemented in a specific manner. The common thing for all of them were the applied approaches (that found their expression in different activities) and by the unifying belief that change is possible and needed for the better future of the Roma.

Within the “Prevention of Early/Forced Marriages” project were implemented several types of activities:

1. SURVEY ON THE STATE-OF-ART OF THE PROBLEM “EARLY/ARRANGED MARRIAGES”

During the first months of the project was conducted a survey on the phenomenon of “early marriages” in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. It included several activities. The national representative sociological survey on family attitudes of the Roma in Bulgaria involved almost 3000 people from 595 households in segregated Roma neighbourhoods. The survey presented a clear picture of the state-of-art of the problem of early marriages among the main Roma groups in different regions in Bulgaria, dethroning many of the widespread myths in this area. It revealed the main trends in family attitudes of the modern Roma, the motivation of parents and young people and the ways for achieving an effective impact.

²⁰ The local campaigns were not implemented only among Romanian speaking Roma – *rudari*, but as the conducted research showed, the early/forced marriages in this group are of a great rareness





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Another activity was the review on the legislative, normative and institutional framework, related with “early marriages” in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The review showed the strengths, but also the existing omissions in the three countries.

Extremely useful was the survey on the attitudes of the field workers (social workers, teachers etc.), conducted in the three countries. It revealed the views of the officers in the institutions who directly work on the field with the communities, where early marriages occur. More precisely: it showed the different views of the social workers, because it was found that the views of the social workers and the teachers are significantly different, and often there is no communication between them.

2. IMPLEMENTING LOCAL CAMPAIGNS FOR PREVENTING EARLY/FORCED MARRIAGES

Local Roma activists implemented coordinated campaigns in the relevant Roma communities in 10 municipalities in Bulgaria. They implemented a wide range of activities: community discussions, individual and family consultations, door-to-door campaigns, and a “community conference” (an adapted method for working in the Roma community of the so called “family group conference”, etc.). The achieved results went far beyond the expectations. They clearly showed that social work, which is implemented inside the community by successful Roma representatives, could help not only to solve particular cases, but also to change attitudes. They showed that the discussion on early marriages could be and should be conducted even in the most conservative Roma groups.

An important additional result was the recognition of the activists, who conducted the local campaigns (most of them – young educated Roma boys and girls), as role models for the rest young people in the relevant communities and as authorities for the adults. This fact showed the necessity of targeted support for turning successful Roma into models for their communities: a state policy in this area is still needed. In particular – the achievements showed the necessity of institutionalizing a position “inside” the community, engaged with the organization of field social work in partnership with other institutions.

3. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE INSTITUTIONS WORKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The municipal Departments for Child Protection, the schools, the community centres and the local municipal representatives, as well as the informal Roma leaders were informed about the carried out campaigns, and they actively participated in the activities at the local level. They participated in special trainings for working in the Roma community: it appeared that none of the universities or any other educational or training institution provided such knowledge, even though it was extremely necessary for effective fieldwork.



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4. PUBLIC AWARENESS-RAISING

Awareness-raising campaigns on the phenomenon of “early marriages” and the necessity of overcoming it were organized in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The campaigns targeted the main actors, working in the Roma community – NGO activists, social workers, teachers, journalists, municipal administration officers – and their aim was to motivate them to implement activities for preventing early/forced marriages. For more successful implementation of these activities were prepared and printed educational materials, which were already used in more than 30 schools in Bulgaria and Romania.

Specific emphasis of this activity for Bulgaria was of the incorporation of the issue of early marriages in the process of social services planning. The elaboration of the regional strategies for social services coincided with the preparation of the local campaigns and the teams that organized them managed to propose and justify the need of incorporating the activities for preventing early/forced marriages in the relevant regional strategies. This has created preconditions for continuing these activities in the upcoming years.

An important feature of the project “Preventing Early/Forced Marriages” was that it was implemented in partnership with the main stakeholders in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The respective Ministries of Labour and Social Policies, the Agencies for Child Protection in Bulgaria and Greece, the State Agency on Roma in Romania, the National Council for Collaboration on Ethnic and Demographic Issues in Bulgaria, the Chief Prosecution and a number of other institutions actively participated in the work of the Steering Committee of the project and the implementation of the main activities. The established partnership and interaction between the above-mentioned key national institutions and non-governmental organisations from these countries show great promise for a sustainable and comprehensive policy, targeted at overcoming early marriages and supporting the modernization of the Roma community.

The implementation of the project “Preventing Early/Forced Marriages” showed that currently within the Roma communities in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, there is a favourable environment for overcoming early/forced cohabitations. The conducted surveys outlined several explicit interrelated processes: modern attitudes gradually start to dominate over the traditional ones in most Roma groups, the share of the modern Roma families is not a small one anymore, and even among the most conservative Roma groups there are young educated Roma, who would like to support the development of their communities. The implemented local campaigns proved that strengthening social work in the traditional and marginalized Roma communities, implemented by the educated representatives of those communities in collaboration with the main stakeholders, may resolve particular cases of early/forced marriages and even bring change to the attitudes.



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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Early/arranged/forced marriages in Bulgaria exist among many Roma people today. At the same time, this problem exists to a different extent among different Roma groups and social strata in the different regions: early marriages are not characteristic for all Roma communities in Bulgaria! In addition, there is a clear trend for overcoming early marriages, which takes place together with the process of modernization of the community.

Family and marital attitudes of the Roma in Bulgaria are presently characterised by several main trends:

1. **The age of early cohabitation and marriage is being raised:** presently the average age of the start of cohabitation in the Roma community is 18 years and 4 months – 18 years and 8 months. The Roma that reject early cohabitation (under the age of 16) are now much more than those who accept it. The percentage of the Roma, for who cohabitation under the age of 14 is acceptable, is very small: 13%, as this age is not considered appropriate.

2. **Education proves to be the most important factor, influencing the raised age of early cohabitation:** the higher the education level is, the later the family is created.

Other important factors are the **economic status** and the **living conditions**: poor Roma people and those living in bad conditions create families earlier.

3. **It is becoming a more common trend for the family to be created by the young people, not by the parents:** the idea that the parents should decide who their children will marry is becoming increasingly unacceptable: 52.2% of the respondents do not approve of this idea. However, 34.5% still approve of it, which is evidence of the patriarchal mentality of a considerable part of the Roma community.

The practice of the girl to run away with the boy if the parents do not give their consent may be defined today as acceptable. The payment of dowry (babaak) today is widely disapproved by the Roma even when the girl is virgin: in this respect there is a substantial difference between the Roma groups, as in some of them (Kaldarashi, Thracian Kalajdjii, Burgudjii) this practice is still very common.

4. **Today simple family households unquestionably prevail over extended families:** similarly to the other ethnic groups in Bulgaria, today the Roma live in a nuclear, not extended family, as was the case not so long ago.

5. **There is a trend of overcoming the traditional family and marital attitudes and acceptance of modern ones:** this has been confirmed by all major trends, described above. The Roma community is on the way from patriarchy to modernity, and still large strata of it have traditional family attitudes but the share of Roma people with more liberal and modern attitudes is increasing and is already prevailing.



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The Bulgarian legislation regarding family, marriage and child protection, is in compliance to the European and international standards. There is a well-developed – though in certain sense too complicated – system of institutions in that respect.

The whole system, provided it functions well, should solve a case of early marriage through the interaction of three (or even two) institution: the school, the Social Assistance Directorate (through the municipal Department for Child Protection), the municipal administration or the police. The school is the first that may have indications of an early marriage because of the child dropping out, i.e. he/she stops attending school. In that case the principal should report to the municipal Department for Child Protection, which should investigate the case and suggest a solution. The municipal administration or the police may be informed for the implementation of this decision. This procedure may be accelerated if the Department for Child Protection considers the case on its own initiative.

Three are the **main problems** today that in practice impede the functioning of this chain. The first of them is the **unwillingness of a great part of the officers in the three mentioned institutions to intervene in case of early marriages**. This unwillingness is often justified with the argument that “this is a Roma tradition, their internal issue”. A great part of the teachers and social workers think that the problem of early marriages cannot be solved (both as an issue and as a specific case) and do not intervene.

We should emphasise here that the Bulgarian legislation apply to all Bulgarian citizens and common law has practically no legal value. The representatives of the Roma community, in particular – of Roma NGOs, have never put the legalisation of traditional practices as early marriage as an issue and such debate has never been part of the public discourse. Therefore, in most cases behind the mentioned argument can be seen unwillingness to work, and sometimes – open discriminative attitudes against the Roma.

The second problem is the **mutual distrust between the institutions that should interact at the local level in solving the cases of early marriages**. The mutual accusations between teachers and social workers for not reacting adequately are a common practice in many municipalities, and the effective interaction is rather an exception. An indicator for this is the small number of reports by teachers and principals to the Departments for Child Protection. The State Agency for Child Protection makes efforts to achieve better coordination between the mentioned institutions, which in some places give results, but is obvious that a lot more need to be done in this respect.

The third, extremely important problem is that **none of the mentioned institutions has been recognised by the endangered strata of the Roma community**. The reasons for that can be searched in several directions. Roma people working in the Departments for Child Protection or in schools are exceptions. Moreover, the cases of clearly expressed discriminatory attitudes of



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social workers or teachers are not unusual. The approaches used (particularly by the Departments for Child Protection) often are purely administrative and formal, relying on more serious sanctions as a key measure for overcoming the problem. This approach is more likely to capsule the Roma community and make it resistant to any external intervention regarding these cases.

In addition, as the fourth important problem may be pointed out that the **activities for the prevention of early marriages are not effectively regulated**: the issues related with early marriages are not discussed at school. Though in the syllabus of some basic school subjects are included topics related to the issue (e.g. the family), no discussion is held on early marriages – the teachers in most cases do not have the knowledge or attitude to organise such a discussion, this is not included in the respective textbooks either. The only exception is some topics included in the school aids for the optional subject Folklore of Ethnic Groups²¹. Neither the Departments for Child Protection, nor the police or the prosecution implement any prevention campaigns.

Having in mind all pointed above the need to change the situation of cases of early marriages is crucial. The main task in Bulgaria should be to create **a synergy of NGOs and state institution public policies** and to implement at all levels public policies specifically directed to prevent, detect and combat the harmful practice of early marriages.

Prevention and education campaigns should take place with the equal involvement of all stakeholders and the ownership of the process should remain with the targeted traditional Roma communities. The above mentioned in no way releases the commitment of **the state institutions**, which **should create the mechanisms for institutionalising and financial provision for these activities**.

Personal example of successful Roma people should be emphasised: the young, educated and coping with the challenges of life Roma that have left a particular community, and have grown up before the eyes of the others and managed to achieve more than the rest without forgetting their Roma origin and without neglecting their private life and family, can influence significantly the others. The personal example of those Roma may be influential in two ways. The first is by inviting successful Roma to participate in public meetings, hearings, etc. The other, more effective approach is with empowerment of those Roma and engaging them on certain positions to work for the prevention of early marriages in the community: among their group or among other Roma. Transformation of those Roma into role models, i.e. the validation of their authority is a particular guarantee for success.

²¹ Topics related to early marriages and family creation models can be found in the Workbook “Roads Retold” by D. Kolev and T. Krumova, used in teaching Folklore of Ethnic Groups – Roma Folklore as an optional subject in 5th – 8th grades.



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There is a close link between the quality of education in the relevant settlements, **building motivation for continuation of the education** and the distribution of early/forced marriages. In this respect, the transformation of the schools – where a problem with dropouts exist – in attractive and adequate to the modern requirements educational centres, inevitably would influence positively the prevention of early marriages and births. The increasing of the motivation for studying would happen in many ways – through the measures specified above (personal example from successful Roma, community discussions, etc), and also through activities for improving the quality of the educational process in the existing schools, activities for introducing different forms of intercultural education (e.g. elective subjects on Roma folklore, celebration of the calendar holidays at school, etc.) and for involving the Roma parents in the educational process (through trainings for parents, involving the parents in the classes on Roma folklore, involving the Roma parents into the school Board, etc.²²). Increasing the motivation for continuing education influences significantly the communities, where the process of overcoming the traditions is on the way and early, but not forced marriages occur. In these communities early marriages most often are initiated by the young people themselves and increasing the motivation for education directly leads to overcoming early marriages.

Support for community development is another important principle that should be applied in the efforts for prevention of the early marriages. The community and the different communal mechanisms for influence are very important for the life of the individual Roma. Thus, it is necessary for the community to participate actively in the efforts for overcoming different negative practices. Even more – the entire community development has to be supported. That may occur through different community discussions, activities for support of individual members of the community, etc. The sustainable frame, where the community development may be supported, is the establishment of community centres that should systematically organize the indicated activities.

The principle of **interaction between all institutions**, which are relevant to the existence of the problem with early/forced marriages, is of a high importance for its limitation. The structures of the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior that are situated in the problematic settlements should be motivated and encouraged to be informed about the problem and to take their responsibilities for its prevention. They should overcome their passiveness on the issue, which is usually excused with the argument that “this is a Roma tradition and we do not want to get involved”. It appears

²² Similar activities were tested within the project “Decreasing the Dropout Rate of Roma Children”, which have shown the possibility to involve actively the parents.





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that the image of the representatives of those institutions has a positive impact within the community regarding the knowledge and observance of the existing rules.

Meanwhile, it should be taken into consideration that this is not enough. **The institutionalization of a position within the community** is needed. The influence of the institutions on the Roma community from the “outside” (especially with the more traditional Roma groups) is limited. The influence has to be supported by activities of people inside the community, who are doing the social work by working for solving certain problems (like the one with early marriages, dropping out from school) and at the same time they support the development of the community itself. This position should be institutionalized.

Another successful model could be the **community discussions**, where participants are the significant people from the community – the external significant persons (e.g. the spiritual leader, the mayor of the village, the teacher, etc.²³), as well as the people with internal significance (e.g. informal leaders, who are usually wise people and their advice is accepted). In some Roma groups the internal authorities have some level of institutionalization: e.g. the so called “meshere” – among the group of the Kaldarashi. Usually among the other groups there is no such institutionalization, but the informal leaders are very well-known (“cheribashii”, “patroni”, etc.) and should definitely be involved in the community discussions.

The implemented campaigns clearly showed the necessity of such discussions. The discussed topics cannot be limited only to early marriages: other topics of importance for the local community are also a part of the discussed issues – employment, education, received services.

Another effective method appeared to be the **group discussion** where participants are not the whole community, but representatives of a certain group: e.g. young people, women and etc. The group discussion gives opportunity to the participants to debate the issues in depth, as long as there are no hesitations for speaking in front of the older people. The topics for these discussions cannot be limited only to early marriages either, but to many others as well.

With a view of the fact that there is a lack of information within the pilot municipalities among the young people with respect to **reproductive health and family planning**, obviously there is a necessity of organizing conversations and discussions on this topic that should be presented in the best way with regard to the audience. It should be taken in consideration that there are serious differences in the approach of presenting this information in the Roma community: depending on the different Roma groups, on the level of modernization of the local community and on the age

²³ NB! It should be judged who from the external environment is actually known and trusted. Often the social worker is not among the recognized authorities.





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(the generation) of the audience. For example, the usual measures for distribution of information on reproductive health and family planning could have a contra-indicated effect in the groups of the Kaldarashi, Burgudjii (especially those in North-East Bulgaria, the Thracian Kalajdjii, etc.: absolutely different information materials are needed there, that are relevant to the cultural norms of the group.

The method of the **family-group conference** could be briefly defined as a method, which aim is to make the family a generator of positive social change and is based on the understanding that the families could find solutions for their problems by themselves, they have enough resources to manage with the problems of their children, as well as the right to participate in the decision making in their plans for the future. This method proved to be extremely suitable for working with the Roma families that quite often refuse any external intervention in managing their family issues, but have enough capacity to make the best decision for their children, if they receive a minimal support and realize the responsibility which they have for this decision. In most cases, it is relevant to transform the method into a **community conference** through the involvement of internal authorities from the community: often, it is the influence of the community that is decisive for an early marriage (e.g. through the power of tradition) and in such cases it is important to engage the community authorities in the prevention of early marriages through the model of the **community conference**.

Many of the implemented campaigns showed the necessity of **door-to-door** campaigns in the Roma neighbourhoods. Individual conversations or family discussions within the frames of such campaigns appear to be an effective measure for increasing the awareness on the issue of early marriages, which is a necessary step for its solution.

The described methods are not a “magic wand” guaranteeing immediate success. Their application depends very much on the skills of those who realize the activities for preventing early marriages: one and the same approach could be very effective or bring opposite results. The different methods should be in accordance with the specifics of the local community: some of them may be applied among all Roma, while others will influence effectively certain groups. In any case, it should be taken into consideration that solving the issue of early marriages cannot be achieved in a short time: continuous and systematic efforts are needed so that the described methods and principles may bring sustainable results.



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