



## EARLY MARRIAGE PREVENTION NETWORK PROJECT

### FINAL PROJECT CONFERENCE

#### Report

On **24 November 2017** in Brussels **the Final Conference** within the project “Early Marriage Prevention Network” was held. Representatives of all project partners, European institutions and NGOs were present at the conference.

**The objectives** of the conference were to present the EMPN project and its results, to generate debate and discuss possible challenges, solutions and good strategies in preventing early marriages in Roma communities.

The event was opened by Ivan Ivanov, Executive director of ERIO, who welcomed the participants. Mr. Ivanov explained that the project was implemented by organizations of several countries which combined their efforts for combating early marriages among Roma communities. In this respect the event is unusual for Brussels as it concerns a topic which is important but not much discussed. The aim of the conference is to report about project activities and to discuss good practices for prevention of early marriages.

He presented the representatives of the institutions participating in the event and gave the word to Mrs. Madi Sharma, who presented EESC. Mrs. Sharma explained that EESC represents the people at grass root level. Roma situation is an important topic for EESC. As a member of the EESC permanent study group on Roma Inclusion she has been working on Roma issue for 10 years, yet many changes have not occurred and she welcomed the efforts of the partner organisations to work on an important issue such as early marriages.

Malina Slavova, project manager, said that the project united the efforts of seven organisations which have done a lot of hard work. The topic of the project is very hard as people feel uncomfortable to talk about it but it needs talking. The project is based on child rights as early marriages are violation of children’s rights. It included activities with professionals and within the community.

Ivan Ivanov added that there are external factors leading to discrimination but also there are internal factors. The community has to change their traditions in order not to violate their children’s rights so direct work is very important in this respect.

Mrs Lavinia Banu, a representative of the Roma Unit, DG Justice, stated that the topic of early marriages used to be a taboo and the fact that it is now talked about is a good beginning to start to look for solutions. Early marriages are connected to Roma but not only to this group of people. It occurs among other groups and may be connected not only to ethnicity but to poverty as well. Talking about early marriages the topic of education is important as a means of



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integration in society. Education is a fundamental right of the children. It is not a privilege and everybody should have access to quality education. Education should be addressed to the needs of Romani children. In this respect REC programme provides financing for awareness raising activities and anti-discrimination actions.

Madi Sharma talked about possible solutions of the problem of early marriages – involvement of Roma men; empowerment of Roma girls and women; encouragement of Roma girls to stay at school; more employment opportunities for Roma women, providing options for financial and personal independence; more opportunities for women for social interaction; building trust between institutions and Roma. The whole society is responsible for solving the problem and in this respect the work of the civil organisations is very valuable and important.

Livia Jaroka, Vice president of the European Parliament, supported the views shared by Madi Sharma. She expressed the opinion that job creation for Roma women is extremely important as it gives them the opportunity to be active and integrated in society. She told about some initiatives in Hungary showing good examples of working with representatives of Roma community. A film about a Hungarian school was displayed. The activities included work with children as they are motivated to go to school through involving them in activities they like to do such as football, dance, music classes etc. At the same time enterprises for women were created to involve their mothers. Other activities carried out are: sex education, designing of traditional Roma clothes; elaboration of a social application on mobile phones including the options of ringing the local doctor, the local teacher, policemen etc.; involvement of women in voting. Mrs Jaroka accentuated on the important role of Roma women as a factor leading to a change in the community.

In the next panel Malina Slavova, project manager, presented the project and the representatives of all project partners talked about project activities in each country, the results they have achieved and the challenges they have overcome.

Mr Ioannis Grypiotis, Mayor of Evrotas municipality, Greece explained that the project will be continued in the municipality by other organizations which were interested in the activities. In the municipality there are 1000 Roma people and projects for employment and health access have been implemented.

In the afternoon session representatives of three institutions spoke about the challenges in addressing early marriages. They approached the issue from different aspects.

Michaela Bauer, UNICEF, said that early marriages are a violation of children's rights and a serious problem as they happen in every country. Statistics however hide the problem because of lack of reliable data. She stated that the comprehensive approach i.e. working with children, parents and professionals is a good way for solving the problem.

Claude Cahn, Office of the United Nations, outlined the reasons for early marriages – no access to education, no employment opportunities, tradition. In order to deal with the problem a lot of direct social work is needed. The United Nations could support projects engaged in rescue work on child marriages.



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In the last panel two topics were concerned - Malina Slavova, project manager, spoke about Inter-institutional and inter-sectorial interaction related to early marriages in the partner countries and Galina Markova, project evaluator, talked about the impact of the project activities with children.

After a Q&A session the conference was closed by Malina Slavova. She summarized the measures for combating early marriages - empowerment of children and women, involvement of men, more social work, more data collection. She also thanked the project partners for their dedicated work and involvement during the implementation of the project “Early Marriage Prevention Network”.



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