



**RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL NORMS
WHICH PREVENT ROMA GIRLS
FROM ACCESS TO EDUCATION**

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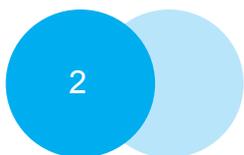
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Social norms in Romani communities that prevent girls' access to education and particularly to secondary education

1.1. INTRODUCTION



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Romani children and youth, and girls in particular, tend to drop out from the educational system in some communities despite the constitutionally guaranteed right to education and the regulated compulsory education for all Bulgarian citizens aged 5 to 16. The reasons for that are, on the one hand, rooted in the socioeconomic living conditions, and on the other, connected with the communities' socio-normative peculiarities and the view of girls' self-realization and life path. Institutions and stakeholders in Bulgaria are still facing the challenge of what measures to implement in order to fulfill the right to education and how to improve the educational status of Romani communities. The steps taken so far are rather in the mode of sanctions and penalties imposed upon the Romani children's families. There is a lack of effective and systematic measures that are designed according to the variety of reasons hindering the access to education, which would facilitate the prevention of school dropouts.

Several documents adopted at the government level address the problem of Romani girls' dropping out of school and view child marriage as one of the reasons for it. Among them is the National Strategy for the Child 2008-2018, the Action Plan on the implementation of the final recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Other strategic

documents such as the National Strategy for Demographic Development in the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2030), the National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020), the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020), the Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities, and the Action Plan for its implementation for the period 2015-2020 also pay attention to the need for preventing school dropouts, pointing to the ethno-cultural, social, and economic reasons related to the higher proportion of such dropouts among the Roma. In the Country Programme Action Plan 2013-2017, signed with the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria, UNICEF-Bulgaria commits to contribute to the implementation of policies supporting the creation of an educational environment for young people and disadvantaged children, especially Romani girls.

The report summarizes and analyzes behavior patterns viewed as part of the Romani communities' socio-normative system and associated with the issue of child marriages and early childbirths. The patterns are regarded in relation to their impact on Romani girls' access to education and school attendance. The report is the result of research on the main factors and actors/parties/members of a community or a family that all affect the social norms and contribute to maintaining child-marriage practices. Along with the study of issues and factors for Romani girls' dropping out of school, the research aims to reveal the positive trends in Romani communities by giving examples of Romani families where children are encouraged to continue their education. For the research, it was important to register not only the characteristic profile of Roma communities and families where fulfillment of the right to education is problematic for girls, but also to observe those groups where the right to compulsory education is fully implemented and the youngsters' level of education is comparable to the national average. The hypothesis was that via examination of groups or communities where youngsters have lower education (and their comparison to those where the average level does not differ from that of the country) the research can secure solutions for engagement that aim to achieve a qualitative change in communities with lower levels of education.

The following analysis is an outcome of the research "Social Norms in Romani Communities that Prevent Girls' Access to Education and Particularly to Secondary Education", commissioned by UNICEF-Bulgaria. It was conducted in the period September 2014 – January 2015 and is comprised of two phases: 1) analysis of existing reports, studies, data and strategic documents discussing the issue of socio-cultural norms, child marriage and education among the Roma in Bulgaria and in other countries of the Balkan region and Europe, and 2) a field research among Romani communities in the local administrative regions Shumen, Montana, Sliven, as well as interviews with Roma activists and experts in the field of education and culture of the Roma.

The research results are expected to form the basis of a series of supportive and preventive measures for reducing school dropouts and increasing the educational level among Romani girls.

The fieldwork was implemented with the support of local partners to whom I would like to express my gratitude: Maya Grozdanova and Milen Gechovski, the regional coordinators of UNICEF in Sliven and Montana; the team at the Family Consultative Center in Novi Pazar and the "Hayachi" Romani Women Association; Dimitrina Mineva, manager of "Spring Rainbow" kindergarten in Shumen; Tashko Tanev, president of the "Naangle-2001" Foundation; Margarita Hristova, health mediator in Sliven; Kolyo Kolev, health mediator in the village of Gradets; Velcho Krastev from the "Tehnitari" Association in Stara Zagora; Lyudmila Petrova from the Student Society for Development of Interethnic Dialogue; and the dozens of Romani girls, young people, and families whom I met and who shared their views and experiences, values, aspirations, and problems.

2. APPROACH AND METHODS



2.1. Aim and objectives

This report is the result of research and field work, the main objective of which was to explore and analyze behavior patterns that are part of the Romani communities' socio-normative system related to child marriages, early pregnancy and childbirth, school attendance, and dropout rates of Romani girls.

Objectives of the study:

- Analysis of policies, practices and measures addressing the issues of child marriages;
- Revealing gender roles in Romani communities and their impact on Romani girls' education;
- Discussion of social norms related to child marriages followed by early pregnancy and childbirth in various Romani communities, and the typology of the key factors that influence the sustainability or change of the available practices and views regarding these issues;
- Identification of the main actors/parties/members in the community or family and the key factors which affect the social norms and contribute to the maintaining of an early marriage practice;
- Identification of the main actors/parties/members in the community or family and the key factors which might contribute to changing the practice of early marriage;
- Development of recommendations for actions and measures that will contribute to the fulfillment of the right to education of Romani girls and to reducing the number of child marriages in Romani communities.

Implementation of the aim and its objectives would contribute to better understanding the causes and factors of Romani girls dropping out of school. At the same time, attention will be paid not only to child marriage practices and factors that could change them, but also to the general attitude toward education as social capital, as well as to any common institutional problems that impede the Romani girls' access to education.

2.2. Subject and object

The subject of study was Bulgarian Romani communities and their major attitudes to education and marriage, particularly several Romani groups in the regions of Montana, Sliven, and Shumen. The research included different groups of young people: married girls, unmarried girls, unmarried boys, women and men of different generations, local leaders, Roma students, and local and national activists and experts on Romani issues.

The objects of the research are the communities' norms and the factors related to marriage and their influence (positive or negative) on the common attitudes and practices regarding the Romani girls' education. Roma communities' socio-normative systems and practices vary depending on their group membership. Attitudes within the groups also vary according to the specific community, generation, or gender. Along with that, a number of factors such as the socio-economic status of the family, the educational status and motivation of the parents, the place of residence, etc., were studied.

2.3. Main definitions

The definition **Roma** is applied as a common term for a heterogeneous community of groups with a common origin who, in Bulgaria, similarly to those in other parts of Europe, have different languages, self-denomination, identity (including a non-Roma one), and who are usually referred to as "Gypsies" by the surrounding population. The Roma are not a socially isolated community and the processes in Romani communities should always be considered in their relationship to the tendencies of the macro society. According to Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, the Roma live at least in two dimensions: their own (Roma) community and the macro society in which they are an integral part (and with whom they share centuries of common living).¹ At the same time, among the Roma, there are traditional unwritten rules and norms of social behavior which are perceived by each member of the community as unique Romani characteristics. These rules and norms are often referred to as *romanipen* (Romanihood).² They are viewed by the Roma as an important identity-marker separating them from all other communities they interact with. That is why the Roma consider it so important to respect and maintain such norms.

The term **community social norms** refers to commonly accepted social norms in a Romani group and which determine how an individual can and must behave according to his or her status within the group. The **socio-normative system** is the aggregation of all commonly accepted social norms within the group and their interconnection.

The term **marriage** defines the act of creation of a Romani family which usually occurs with the public announcement of the marriage union among the local community. According to the community's social norms, such an announcement is sufficient enough and often the only proof of marriage (especially

1 Marushiakova E. and V. Popov. 1993. *Gypsies in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Club '90, p. 13.

2 Mirga A. 1987. The Category of "Romanipen" and the Ethnic Boundaries of Gypsies. *Ethnologia Polona* 13: 243-255.

when the girl and the boy are underage). **Child marriage** is the marriage that occurs before the wedded couple's coming into lawful age (18 years). In social sciences this marriage is defined as early.

2.4. Methodology

The study is based on ethnographic research with a multidisciplinary approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

The research was conducted in two main phases: document analysis and field research. The field research was guided by two qualitative ethnographic approaches: thick description, as defined by Clifford Geertz³ which allows the collection of saturated information from all generations in the local Romani communities, and the multi-sited ethnography, as defined by George Marcus⁴, through which the same phenomenon could be studied within different communities and places, allowing analysis of the factors that lead to a change of attitude towards child marriage and the education of Romani girls.

The document analysis included:

- Review of legal framework and policy documents: strategies and plans that address the issues researched;
- Review of policies and practices undertaken by state institutions and NGOs;
- Review and analysis of available statistical data relating to cohabitation in child age, the educational status of girls in such cohabitation, and school dropouts;
- Review of research and practices related to child marriage in other countries in Europe.

The field research included in-depth field trips in three administrative regions: Montana, Sliven, and Shumen. In each of them a survey was conducted in three types of location: the regional city, a smaller town, and a village. The study in Montana was held in the city of Montana, the town of Berkovitsa, and the village of Dolni Tsibar (Valchedram municipality); in the administrative region of Sliven the locations were: the city of Sliven, the town of Nova Zagora, and the village of Gradec (Kotel Municipality); in the Shumen administrative region, the three sites were respectively: the city of Shumen, the town of Novi Pazar, and the villages of Zlatar (Veliki Preslav municipality) and Salmanovo (Shumen municipality). The survey among unmarried girls and boys was conducted in the form of mini-focus groups. A total of 25 group meetings with 110 unmarried teenagers aged 15-20 (of which 49 girls and 61 boys) were conducted (the invited boys were often accompanied by other male friends). In towns with more than one Romani group and/or neighborhood (Shumen, Sliven, Montana) several focus groups were organized, since the original idea to gather youngsters from different neighborhoods in a single group could not be realized. Focus groups were therefore held in all neighborhoods. The survey planned as a mini-focus group for married girls was conducted in this manner only in Novi Pazar, while in other locations the field research was implemented by means of informal conversations and interviews with married girls in their own family setting, which turned out to be a more convenient environment for discussing their early marriages. It included 36 girls married before their lawful age. The research among elderly women and men, and women from all generations, was conducted by

3 Geertz, C. 1973. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In: *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-30.

4 Marcus, G. 1995. Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 95-117.

means of observations, interviews, and informal conversations in Romani neighborhoods. Meetings and conversations were held with 64 families and 50 women from different generations. A total of 19 interviews with Romani university students were held: 16 girls and 3 boys.

Many of the questions received a standard response reflecting the common rules and norms in the community. This facilitated the research, as it led to a prompt accumulation of saturated information. The involvement of interlocutors from different generations and the processing of information gathered from all stakeholders allowed a description of the norms in their contemporary manifestations, and revealed the different generations' attitudes towards them.

The study at the national and regional levels included meetings with formal and informal Roma leaders, experts, activists, social workers, and pastors from various institutions and NGOs, as well as Roma health mediators and researchers. Interviews were conducted at the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP); the Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities at the Ministry of Education and Science (CEICSEM-MES), with three members of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEI) who come from the respective field research regions; representatives of the Department for Child Protection in the municipalities of Montana and Shumen; twelve Roma health mediators, nine Roma leaders from local NGOs and municipal administration, five Roma activists and experts at national level, three Romani researchers (two of them women), four Evangelical pastors, and eight Romani activists from Europe.

3. ROMANI COMMUNITIES AND GIRLS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION



3.1. Romani Communities

The number of the Roma in Bulgaria is 325 343. However, in expert evaluations based on observations of Romani origin, communities that declare a different identity in public and census records, are estimated at 800 000 people. As per the 2011 census, 55,4% of the Roma live in villages. They are a prominent number of the population in the region of Montana – 12,7%, Sliven – 11,8%, Dobrich – 8,8%, and Yambol – 8,5%.⁵ Their allotment throughout the country is comparatively even and there is hardly a town or a village without any Romani population. The Roma constitute 4,9% of the population but their proportion in some of the age groups is considerably higher: 12% of the children aged 0 to 9 as well as 9% of the group aged 10 to 19, and 6,8% of the young people aged 20 to 29.⁶

The official census data provided information about Bulgarian citizens who identify themselves as Roma. However, the number of all communities categorized as Romani in accordance with the definition set in this report is much higher. The Roma in Bulgaria are classified as an *intergroup ethnic community*,⁷ consisting of groups, metagroup unions, and subgroups, each with their own identity. Similar to the Roma worldwide, the Roma in Bulgaria are not a unified and homogenous community but a heterogeneous one, their group-identity being the greatest factor in terms of behavioral patterns. The adopted Roma communities' classification in Bulgaria is that of Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov with its three main divisions:

5 National Statistical Institute. 2011. Census 2011 (final data). Sofia: NSI, <http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf>

6 Ibidem.

7 Marushiakova, E. Popov, V. 1993. Gypsies in Bulgaria. Sofia: Club' 90.

The first one is the so called *Yerlii* or settled Roma. It is a diverse division inclusive of groups speaking different dialects of the Balkan and Old-Vlax dialect groups of the Romani language as well as Turkish speaking (the majority of which prefer Turkish ethnic identity or prefer the ethnically neutral self-denomination *Millet*), or Bulgarian speaking (the greater part of which prefer to declare Bulgarian ethnic identity). The majority of the groups in that division had settled here a long time ago, others settled in the 1920s and 1930s, and some after 1958. Two internal units are a part of it, *Horahane Roma* (i.e. Turkish Gypsies, meaning Muslims) and *Dasikane Roma* (i.e. Bulgarian Gypsies, meaning Orthodox Christians). The boundaries between these two are historically variable and related to religious shifts. Sub-groups exist within these two units.

The second main division is presented by the so called *Kaldarashi* (or Kardarashi) who speak the New-Vlax dialect of *Romanes* and who had lived as nomads till 1958. Within that division, which has become a unified and homogeneously closed group, plenty of subgroups exist, differentiated on the basis of generic and/or territorial factors.

The third division is the *Rudari* (or *Ludari*; *Kopanari*). They speak an old dialect of the Romanian language and lived as nomads till 1958. Often, they prefer a Vlax/Romanian ethnic identity.

The field research has been conducted in regions mainly inhabited by groups that belong to the division of the settled Roma. These are *Dasikane* and *Horahane Roma*.

The most numerous groups in the North-Western part of Bulgaria, who settled centuries ago, inhabit the region of Montana: *Kalaydzhii* – tinkers (Ogosta District and Kosharnik District – Montana, the village of Dolni Tsibar), *Koshnichari* – basket makers (Kosharnik District – Montana, Rakovitsa District – Berkovitsa), *Reshetari* – sieve makers (Kosharnik District), *Muhchii* (Rakovitsa District). The *Kalaydzhii* and the *Muhchii* had settled historically earlier than the *Koshnichari* and *Reshetari* groups who started to settle at the end of the 1950s. Today these groups are a part of *Dasikane Roma*, i.e. Christian Roma; however, the elder group members still retain memory or reminiscence of the Muslim religion professed in the past (in the nominal and ritual systems, etc.). Protestantism or Eastern Orthodox are the professed religions today. All groups speak Romani, but there is a growing tendency observed among the youngsters in Ogosta District (Montana, and the village of Dolni Tsibar) to not use the Romani language within the family.

The research sites in the region of Sliven are inhabited by groups of settled Roma among which are the *Baychari* (Nikola Kochev District – Sliven), groups with *Turkish identity* (all inhabitants of Shesti District (District Sixth) – Nova Zagora, as well as some of the inhabitants in Nadezhda District – Sliven), *Goli Tsigani* – naked Gypsies (Nadezhda District – Sliven), *Musicians* (Nadezhda District – Sliven) and *Darvari* – woodcutters, widely known as *Gradeshki Tsigani* (all the Roma population in the village of Gradets, and also a small part of the Roma population in Nadezhda District – Sliven). The so-called *Turks* belong to *Horahane Roma* due to their professed Muslim religion (and an interesting process of evangelization is being observed among some of the Turks in Nadezhda District). However, the rest of the groups (*Baychari*, *Musicians*, *Goli Tsigani*, and *Gradeshki*) define themselves as *Dasikane Roma* and follow Protestantism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Among the *Musicians* and the *Goli Tsigani*, Muslim religion and rituals are retained. The groups who prefer *Turkish identity* speak native Turkish; the *Musicians*, the *Gradeshki* and the *Goli Tsigani* speak Romani. However, the use of Romani in the family environment is falling into decay among the *Baychari*.

The research sites in the region of Shumen are mainly inhabited by settled *Roma*. Only the village of Zlatar (Veliki Preslav Municipality) is inhabited by *Rudari* as well. These groups belong mainly to

Horahane Roma due to their Muslim religion (now and in the recent past). Among them are *Horahane Roma* with *Romani identity* (the greater part of the Roma in the region of Shumen, as well as in the village of Zlatar) and those who prefer Turkish or *Millet identity* (the town of Novi Pazar, Shumen, and the village of Zlatar). Evangelization is observed in some of the groups with Romani identity and with native Romani language, whereas the groups with Turkish identity and native Turkish language use follow Islam. The Musicians are a part of *Dasikane Roma* (Vitosha District – Shumen, the village of Salamanovo). They speak Romani and follow Eastern Orthodox or Protestant Christianity.

3.2. Roma educational status and Romani girls dropping out of the educational system

Generally, Romani communities have a lower educational status in comparison to the majority of the population in the country, a situation comparable to that in other European countries.⁸ Romani educational status changed dynamically after 1950, when state policy for mass-education for the Roma began and the Gypsy population generally became literate.⁹ As a result, the average educational level of the Roma increased to a great extent.

Educational status among those defining themselves as Roma, 2011¹⁰

Educational Status	Number	Percentage for all in this category	Percentage for the ones defining themselves as Roma
University	948	0,07%	0,29%
Secondary school	18 948	0,69%	5,82%
Primary school	97 544	6,80%	30,00%
Primary school and non-Completed Education	131 337	17,25%	40,37%
Never attended school	26 154	37,85%	8,04%
Child	50 412	12,34%	14,50%

According to the last census records, the illiterate number of the population is 112 778. The largest number is the Roma at 11,8%, whereas the percentage of those who define themselves as Bulgarians is 0,5%, and of those who define themselves as Turks is 4,7%.¹¹ The number of illiterate Romani females is twice that of illiterate Romani males.¹² Bulgaria is one of the few countries in the EU where the number of girls ceasing to attend school is higher than that of boys.¹³ As of February 2011, the number of children between 7 and 15 inclusive, who should be attending school but do not, is 81 000; and 23,2% of the Roma at this age do not attend school, as well as 11,9% of the Turks (a part of the Romani communities who prefer to declare Turkish identity at the census), and 5,6% of the Bulgarians.

8 FRA – European Union Agency for Human Rights. 2014. Roma – Data in Focus. Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

9 Dimitrov, D. and collective 1980. Recognition of socialist lifestyle among Bulgarian citizen from Roma origin. Sofia; Kolev, G.2010. Bulgarian Communist Party and Gypsies during the period 1944-1989. Sofia: Center for public policies.

10 Data from the National Statistical Institute, quoted in Tilkidzhiev, N., Milenkova, V., Nedelcheva, T., Hristova, S., Petkova K., Mileva, N. 2011. The successful Roma. Sofia: East – West, p. 506.

11 National Statistical Institute. 2011. Census 2011 (final data). Sofia: NSI.

12 Pamporov, A., Kolev, D., Krumova, T., Yordanov, I., 2008. Roma in Bulgaria: Informational handbook. Sofia: “Open society” Foundation, p.27.

13 Zahariev, B., Yordanov, I., Decheva, Y. 2013. Lost future? Research on phenomena of not enrollment st school. Sofia: UNICEF.

Some of the reasons for this include: the economic status of the country, which has a negative impact on the Romani social and economic conditions (poverty and unemployment among parents); a negative attitude towards the Roma that is widespread in Bulgarian society, reflecting on the treatment of Romani children in Bulgarian schools; labour migrations of Romani parents or whole families to larger cities or abroad; children participating in the family's economic activities; poor educational status as well as poor motivation for their children's education on behalf of Romani parents; the lack of mechanisms guaranteeing application of basic rights, such as the right to education or effective measures protecting those rights in the case of violation.

A recent report by UNICEF – Bulgaria shows that the greatest number of girls' dropouts is in the junior high school.¹⁴ The higher percentage of Romani girls dropping out during junior high school (fifth to eighth grade) and the trend (especially in the rural regions) for Romani girls not to begin secondary school is also due to socio-cultural specifics in some Romani communities related to girls' behavioral models with regard to their "good name" guarantee among the local community and the expected behaviour with regard to their future marriage and family life preparation. The relevance of these problems depends on the particular situation in the particular region, town, or village, as well as on the socio-cultural specifics of each Romani community in accordance with its group identity. For example, the percentage is higher among the groups belonging to the so called *Horahane Roma* Muslim Roma (part of them with an identity different from the Romani identity), and even child marriages are widespread in certain locations, whereas in other places the marriageable age among those belonging to *Dasikane Roma* is increasing and fully comparable to that in the surrounding communities. With regard to the residential factor, higher conservatism in the child marriage practice is observed in cities with large, segregated neighbourhoods, compared to that in villages. This is a result of the deeper isolation and encapsulation in those districts.

At the same time, the educational level in the Romani community is increasing and more Romani children and their parents are interested in a higher educational status with regard to better realization of possibilities and higher income and life standard for the family or the future family. It is a recent trend for more Roma to finish primary school as a minimum, and so the number of young Roma with secondary education and even university degrees is increasing, although it remains comparatively low. Similarly in the macro community, the number of Romani girls who attend university or have recently graduated university is higher than the number of the boys.¹⁵ Therefore, it has been of importance for us to research not only the characteristics of Romani communities, groups, and families (where there is an existing issue with the implementation of the right for school attendance) but also in such groups where the right to education is fully realized.

Various models, attitudes, and practices with regard to Romani girls' educational status are observed within the Romani groups in the three regions where the research was conducted. The highest Roma (and Romani girls') educational status is in the region of Montana, the trend being consistent for that region since the 1960s. Lower, however, with a clear tendency for an increase in the last 15 years, is the educational level in the region of Shumen, which is related to a change in the attitude towards girls' education on behalf of the family, various organizations' activities, and the influence of community leaders. The educational status of the girls in the region of Sliven is the lowest. That region is one of the leading places in terms of child marriages and early childbirths.

¹⁴ Ibidem., p. 17.

¹⁵ According to data by the Student Society for Development of Interethnic Dialogue – SSDID.

Contrary to the general trend in the country for an increase in the educational status of Romani girls, there is a decrease in the girls' educational status and their dropout rates in junior high school (compared to their parents and grandparents) in some of the sites in the region of Sliven. The girls in District Six (in the town of Nova Zagora), inhabited by Roma with Turkish identity, have the lowest educational status. Those girls drop out from junior high school mainly due to the preparation and expectation of marriage. Unlike all other sites where an increase in the educational level of younger generations can be observed, just the opposite trend exists in Nova Zagora, where the educational status of Romani girls is the same or lower when compared to that of their mothers and grandmothers. In the old Gypsy neighbourhood in the town of Sliven (Komkula/Nikola Kochev District) compulsory education is established; however, girls drop out before completing secondary school mainly due to getting married. In the neighbourhood, which is the origin of many Romani leaders and intellectuals, getting a university degree is a model known from the period between World War I and World War II. Some girls in the neighbourhood continue on to pursue university education, but in other Roma neighbourhoods in the town of Sliven (Nadezhda District) child marriages are a popular practice within the four groups there (*Turks, Goli Tsigani, Musicians, Gradeshki*) and the most ambitious parents desire their girls to complete the eighth grade (yet, there are few such cases). The girls drop out by junior high school because of marriage expectations or other reasons (a lack of parental motivation, a necessity for participation in the household, and having to support the family economically). For the Roma in the village of Gradets, completing primary school is a common practice. The girls usually continue their education by the age of 16 in the town of Kotel, but few of them finish secondary school.

The educational status of the girls in the research sites in the town of Shumen is higher, the changes being explicitly dynamic in the last 15 years. The urban Roma families belonging to *Horahane Roma* or *Millet* groups (the neighbourhoods in the town of Shumen and Novi Pazar) aim at their daughters' completing secondary education, so the educational level has increased among younger people. For the *Musicians* in urban areas (Shumen, a situation similar to that in other towns inhabited by the group – Kotel, Lyaskovets, Sofia) completing secondary school was set as a model for the girls during the socialist period. In the villages where the research was conducted, however, girls from all groups (*Musicians, Horahane Roma, Bir Millet*) attend school until they complete primary education, with the exception of the Rudari who also complete secondary education. The reasons are not economic but rather related to the lack of parental motivation and concerns about the girls' behaviour when left without control by the family or the local community in an environment where the behavioral pattern is much more open-minded. According to the informers, in these cases the main reason for dropping out of the educational system is the lack of a secondary school in the respective village.

In the region of Montana the highest educational status is that of the girls from the *Kalaydzhii* group, comparable to that of the macro society (the town of Montana, the village of Dolni Tsibar). Obtaining a primary education is a popular model for the *Koshnichari* (Kosharnik District, Montana; Rakovitsa District, Berkovitsa), the *Reshetari* (Kosharnik District, Montana) and the *Muhchii* (Rakovitsa District, Berkovitsa). However, there is a limited number of girls who complete secondary school. There is a lack of motivation for getting a higher level of education for the Reshetari and Koshnichari girls and families in Montana. Sometimes an early marriage is the reason for dropping out of school in these groups. Other problems related to the lack of access to education are financial troubles, low family educational status, extreme poverty, and poor conditions of life. Only few of the girls from the *Koshnichari* and *Muhchii* in Rakovitsa District (Berkovitsa), where child marriage is a popular practice, continue their secondary education in the town. The remoteness from the town, the discrimination

they face in schools, and the lack of parental motivation are among the main reasons for the lack of access to education.

A few typical similarities in terms of places of residence are observed in the research sites. In the old neighbourhoods which are close to the central part of the town (Ogosta in Montana, Nikola Kochev in Sliven) the level of social and educational integration of the Roma is higher in comparison to the Roma who reside in neighbourhoods which are at a greater distance from the town (Nadezhda in Sliven, Kosharnik in Montana). In these old, centrally located Romani neighbourhoods, where girls complete secondary school and university, child marriages are rare. In the segregated Romani neighbourhoods that are remote from a town or a village, a low educational status is observed as well as a child marriage practice. These neighbourhoods are also characteristic with greater conservatism in terms of socio-cultural patterns and lower marriageable age in comparison to both Roma residing in the central parts of the towns and Romani communities in rural areas. In the villages where research has been conducted, typologically similar trends are observed: the marriageable age increases, young people have a greater role in taking decisions, but education is not continued after completing primary school due to the lack of a secondary school in the place of residence, as well as parental concerns about their daughters in case they study in an urban environment.

3.3. Romani family. Gender roles – traditional models and their dynamics



With regard to Romani communities' ethno culture, similarly in all traditional communities, the individual's role is determined by the belonging to a particular group. The individual's status defines the person's own identity before the rest of the group. There are fixed rules of behaviour in each Romani group depending on the individual status defined by the group norms, however, they are not conservative but flexible towards the environment. Social control guarantees the stability and durability of the group as a social structure. The system of rules each group member «studies» while growing up within the group includes behavioral norms, also such concerning behavior according to age, sex, marital status, etc.¹⁶

The family is the main unit that ensures social reproduction, stability, and protection for the individual. In most cases it consists not only of the nuclear family but of a few generations. In such an environment, young males and females grow up and are raised confident about the essence of the family roles set in advance about each individual as a member of the group.

There is a strict division of tasks within the Romani family in terms of sex and age that fits each traditional social model for male and female priorities and activities, the tracks of which are to a certain degree retained among all communities in the Balkan region today. Male and female roles, as well as the family foundation model (described below), form a traditional pattern that can be called an «ideal». It is the basis for practices existing among the various communities nowadays. Variations and elements from it are retained to a certain degree in the present time.

Amongst Romani communities, changes in the socio-normative system occur later in comparison to the macro society. However, it is reasonable to speak about dynamic processes of transformation from tradition to modernity among the Roma, taking into account that the main changes that occurred

¹⁶ Liejoa, J.-P. 1999. Roma, Gypsies, Travellers . Sofia: Litavra, p.81.

in the 1960s (and in some of the communities, from the 1970s) to 1989; the democratic changes have been the starting point for more profound changes locally. For the forth, more conservative type of communities, this «ideal» pattern to a great extent reconciles with the present situation.

For the Roma, the male is the one who publicly represents the family «outside» the community in front of the macro society, which makes him the leading figure. The male is supposed to earn his family's living or at least this function of his is not publicly disputed. Male authority within the family is in accordance with age hierarchy – in his youth, the male obeys and respects the elders. The young family usually lives along with the parents and the grandparents of the male, but they can move away, if the man is able to earn his own family living himself. Normally, it is a rule that the son or the youngest son (in the case of a few sons) and his family remain with the male's parents and take care of them.

The female is the «master» inside the family and her main duty is to secure the everyday existence of the family – from cooking to ensuring that the home is clean and cozy. At the same time, raising the children is also hers as well as the duty of her mother-in-law and the wider female circle of the extended family and kin. Similarly for the male, the female also gains the respect of the others as well as the right to make decisions in the family only after reaching a certain age and mainly after gaining a particular status within the family. By getting married, she becomes a young daughter-in-law, by giving birth to a child – an elder daughter-in-law, but only by becoming a mother-in-law as the wife of the head of the family, she gets a leading position and a particular statute within her family.

As Jean-Pierre Liegeois argues, **the female is the conservative element in the social group, since it is she who makes the reproduction of tradition possible, but this is also the main reason which makes the Romani female the eventual element of changes.**¹⁷ The research in the three regions proves this rule – all interlocutors stated that elder women, mothers-in-law in particular, were the ones keeping and reproducing with the greatest devotion to socio-cultural standards, also coaching the younger generations about how to keep them. The eldest women, the grandmothers and the mothers-in-law, are indicated as the most authoritative in terms of ethno-cultural standards when taking decisions about the marriageable age as well as the marital choice among *Horahane Roma/Millet* groups in the towns of Novi Pazar, Nova Zagora, Sliven, the village of Salamanovo (Shumen Municipality), and among the *Koshnichari*, and partially among the *Muhchii* in the town of Berkovitsa. The role of the middle-aged mothers of young males is indicated as that of the greatest importance when it comes to girls' and boys' upbringing in terms of Romani marriages in the town of Shumen, the village of Zlatar (Veliki Preslav Municipality), *Goli Tsigani* and *Musicians* in Nadezhda District, Sliven, *Gradeshki* in the village of Gradets (Kotel Municipality) and Nadezhda District, as well as for the *Baychari* in Nikola Kochev District, Sliven and the groups in Montana (*Kalaydzhii*, *Reshetari*, *Koshnichari*). Therefore, girls' and boys' mothers and grandmothers are the ones bringing up the family successors in terms of how to behave within the community when they reach an age suitable for marriage, how to choose a spouse, what qualities the future spouse should possess, what family they should come from, etc. Only in the *Musicians* group in the town of Shumen and the village of Salamanovo, the father's role has been indicated as a crucial one in terms of children's upbringing in relation to marriage and marital choice.

However, the female (from the younger generations) is the one allowed to practically implement innovations. The majority of those innovations are influenced by the general socio-cultural processes in the macro society and are not always easily accepted by the elder generations. Examples of such

17 Liejoa, J.-P. 1999. Roma, Gypsies, Travellers. Sofia: Litavra, p.81.

innovations are wearing trousers, or females having their hair cut, which so far has been unacceptable in accordance to the tradition, especially when it comes to unmarried girls.¹⁸ However, this is nowadays a common practice in many Romani communities (yet, with others unacceptable in terms of group standards). The middle-aged females among Horahane Roma in the town of Shumen are precisely the ones urging their children to get a higher level of education. A similar trend, at least in terms of disposition, yet not as a practice, is observed among *Musicians* middle-aged females in Nadezhda District in Sliven and Rakovitsa District in Berkovitsa. The greater part of them say they would like their children (boys and girls) to get a higher educational status instead of getting married, and they speak openly about this with their sons and daughters. However, community norms prevail. The middle-aged females specify that the main reason for an expected or an already conducted early marriage is the pressure of their mothers-in-law, the opinion of the local community (“our neighborhood is like this“, “our nation wants this“), or the fact that the youths themselves wish so.

With regard to children's upbringing, the mother is supposed to instruct them that establishing a family and giving birth to children is the most meaningful part of their lives.¹⁹ Requirements for the girls' upbringing are much stricter. **Preserving one's honour (her virginity) is of the utmost and primary importance for the girl. This is the crucial point ensuring not only the girl's but the whole family's prestige.** Virginity at marriage is of the utmost importance for the Roma nowadays, when this requirement is becoming one of the main Romani ethnic markers which differentiates them from the non-Roma:

...if at present all Gypsies living in Eastern Europe are questioned “What is the main difference between you and gadzhe [non-Roma]?”, the most frequent answer is that the main distinction is “that our girls get married properly” [i.e. virgins]. However, this standard was also relevant in the past for the Balkan and the Slavic nations living together with gypsies (on the Balkans – a few generations ago).²⁰

The importance of preserving girls' virginity in terms of Romani identity and ethno-culture explains why this custom is regarded as a norm kept even nowadays, when the macro society standards are much more liberal.

Generally, the virginity requirement is obeyed and indicated as one of the main reasons for child marriages in the regions of the research. The most conservative situation is in the region of Shumen – among all groups in the region, the requirement for girls' virginity is observed, with rare suspicion of disobedience in the case of a higher age of marriage. A bit different is the situation in the region of Sliven where single cases of pre-marital relationships occur among groups and communities. However, if that becomes publicly known, it should result in a marriage. Such examples were given by the Roma in Nikola Kochev District, Sliven. In Nadezhda District in Sliven the virginity norm is strictly respected. It is believed that at 14 years of age a girl might not be “intact“. The most lax is in the region of Montana where among the *Kalaydzhi* the virginity requirement is no longer respected and is a topic of open discussion among all generations. However, the virginity norm is obeyed in all other groups in the region. Similarly to what the informants in Nadezhda District in Sliven say, the females in the town of Berkovitsa point out that their fear about virginity at the time of reaching sexual maturity makes them force their daughter into marriage, if they realize she is already having a relationship. If a young couple breaks the virginity rule in the communities where it is obeyed, it is obligatory for the

18 Decheva, M.2004. Me bala šukar, mo diklo lolo. Clothing of Roma in Bulgaria. Sofia: EIM. p. 96.

19 Ivaova, E., Krystev, V. 2006. The Roma Woman. Spaces and borders in her life. Stara Zagora: Litera – Print, p. 86.

20 Marushiakova, E., Popov, V. 2012. Roma in Eastern Europe. Lecture courses. Sofia: Paradigma, p.206.

boy and his family to take responsibility and accept the girl whose virginity has been violated as their daughter-in-law.

3.4. Roma marriage

Choosing a wife is traditionally regarded a responsibility of the boy's mother or grandmother, the boy not taking part and often even not knowing the future bride. Nowadays the situation is considerably different. In terms of taking a decision for getting married, more and more quantitative and qualitative research data²¹ confirm that the young ones are those who decide and not their parents, the "old" ones, as it was in the recent past. There is an evident tendency for an increase in the individual incentive at taking decisions about a future husband or wife among the majority of the Romani groups in the country. However, obeying parental opinion has not completely vanished. The trend is also relevant for the regions of the research: Sliven, Shumen, and Montana. However, there are certain locations and certain communities (for example, District Six in Nova Zagora) where the observed practices of getting married almost fully coincide with the already described traditional model: the parents are the ones who choose the spouse and there are even cases when "the boy gets home from school and is informed that he has been married".

The model of the pre-marital relationship between the young people who date and attend cafes or visit friends is gaining more and more popularity, without violating the rule for the girl's virginity. The boy may share with his mother and father which girl he likes and his family normally takes his choice into consideration, taking also into account "what the kin is, what the family is". When the parents accept the boy's choice, the "scenario" set by tradition takes place in accordance with the relevant customs and rituals.

The so-called arranged marriages, defined by both the Roma and the macro society as buying of *the bride*, which stands for paying a ransom by the future husband to the girl's parents, are practiced by Romani groups in the country (for example, the *Kaldarashi* and the *Thracian Kalaydzhi*). This practice is familiar to most of the Romani groups that keep the memory of the payment of a symbolic ransom for the bride called *baba-hak*.

The common way for getting married is by asking *for the bride* on behalf of the boy's family, which takes place in most locations in the form of an engagement, during which a nishan is given and a party is held "by which the news is spread that this girl is already married, so that she is no longer asked for by anyone" (Nadezhda District, Sliven).

Another form of getting married that has existed in particular areas is the so-called bride elopement/bride stealing, practiced if the girl's parents do not wish to marry her off. However, nowadays it is just a simulation and the girl voluntarily allows to be "stolen". If her parents find her before consummation of the marriage and if the girl does not wish to get married, she can leave and return home with her parents. However, if the marriage is consummated, the couple should marry because the girl has already had sexual intercourse and no one would desire to marry her after that. This model is still relevant today.

The most important part of the marriage is its consummation and the announcement of the result. The couple's first marital night can occur as soon as the girl is accepted in the groom's home, a bit later yet before the wedding, or at the time of the wedding itself. The result of the consummation of the

21 Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance "Amalipe". 2011. Prevention of early marriages. Plovdiv: Astarta, 103-105; Ivanova, E., Krastev, V. 2013. Roma/Gypsies in Bulgaria – gender attitude. Stara Zagora: Litera-Print.

marriage is checked by the mother-in-law together with two additional women, one of whom must be from the girl's family: they check the outcome and announce it first to the family of the girl, since "they have been keeping the honour of the girl", and then to the community. In the past, proof of the honour (a sheet or a shirt) used to be demonstrated in front of everyone, whereas nowadays this practice is fading away.

Although virginity is still the most important ethno differentiating marker among Romani groups themselves, as well as in relation to distinguishing them from the other ethnic communities, at some places the young people have a pre-marital sexual relationship for which they get blamed by both families, the girl being blamed for not being able to keep "her honour, the most important thing, the only thing she has". In the cases when the girl shares with her mother that her boyfriend is the one to blame or when the boy insists that he loves the girl, his mother accepts and lets them get married in the customary way. At the same time, among some of the Romani communities from the group of the *Kalaydzhii* in north-western Bulgaria, for example, like those in Ogosta District (Montana, the villages of Rasovo and Dolni Tsibar), the requirement for the bride's virginity is gradually fading away, whereas in the other regions it is still obeyed. Only in Nikola Kochev District, Sliven, examples of pre-marital sexual relationships are given. In such cases the marriage occurs as soon as the youth's parents understand about the loss of virginity or when the girl becomes pregnant.

3.5. Age at marriage. Child marriages and early births

The average age at marriage amongst Romani is lower in comparison to the national average but it has been increasing. Nowadays, not all Roma get married at child age, in contrast with the stereotype imposed by media. In the recent past (the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s) the marriageable age for the Roma has been rather lower. Turning 15-16 years of age for the girls and 17-18 for the boys has been reckoned a deadline for raising a family.

Today, a steady and gradual increase of the marriage age is observed among all Romani groups, although there are sites where child marriages are still an acceptable practice. As per research data from 1999 and 2004, an increased marital age of the Roma is observed in general, and in some quantitative research as of 2008, the average age for starting marital life is 18.9 years for the men and 17 years for the women.²²

As of 2011, research conducted by the Amalipe Center in Romani neighbourhoods indicates that the average age for cohabitation among the women residing in remote neighbourhoods with a prevailing Romani population is 17 years and 5 months, and for the men – 20 years and 1 month.²³ A national-wide survey implemented in 2003 (on Romani female attitudes towards education) specifies that the majority of Romani females in the country between 16 and 20 years are not married.²⁴ For particular groups the marriageable age of girls is similar to that of the surrounding population; i.e., it is high (like *Kalaydzhii* from North-Western Bulgaria, *Kopanari* in the regions of Targovishte and Shumen). For other, more conservative groups, (*Kaldarashi*) or groups residing in segregated neighbourhoods in towns, it is still low. According to data from quantitative research, the age at marriage is directly related to the educational status as well as to factors like poverty and the place of residence:

22 Tomova, I., Pamporov, A. and V. Milenkova. 2008. Socio-economic status of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria. Sofia: Institute for Sociology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 18.

23 Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe. 2011. Prevention of early marriages. Plovdiv: Astarta.

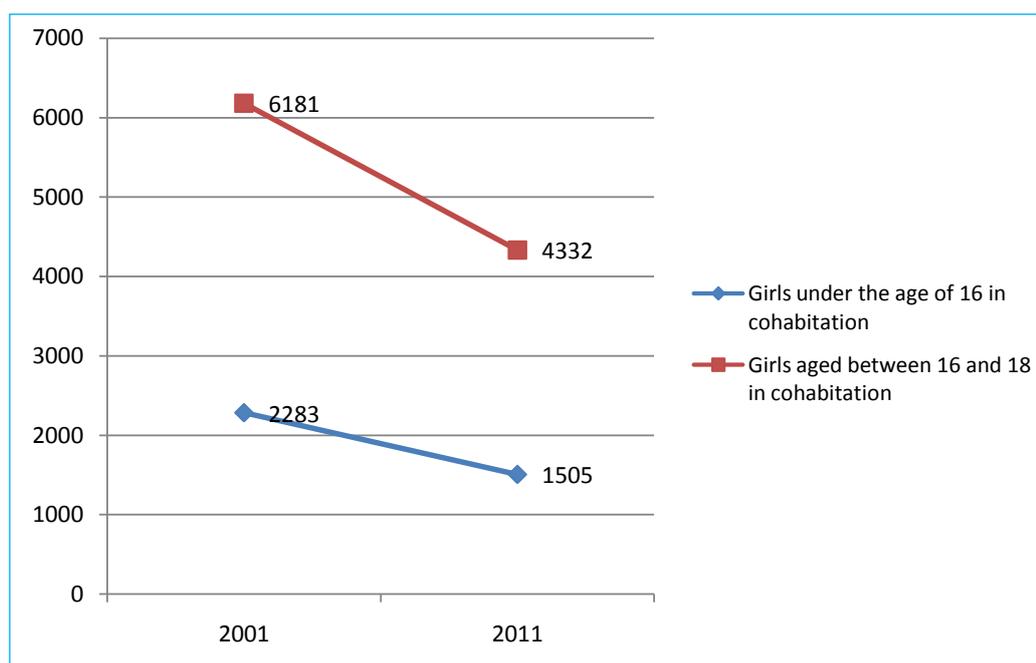
24 Kjachukov, Hr. 2004. Educational status of the Roma woman. Sofia: "Center for research and policies for women."

The average age of first cohabitation among persons with incomplete elementary education is 17 years old; however, the most common start age is 16 years as 50% of the Roma with the lowest educational level already have a partner. The average age of first cohabitation among persons with higher education is 23 years; however the most common start age is 28 years. At the age of 25 about 50% of Roma with higher education have partners already. It is interesting to note that the type of secondary education also has significant influence. The average age of first cohabitation (22) and marriage (23) of those who have graduated vocational schools is 2 years higher compared to the graduates of secondary comprehensive schools.²⁵

Due to the model practiced in the recent past as well as the virginity requirement, early marriage is a practice acceptable by some communities and, in fact, it is the only alternative if the girl is no longer a virgin or if the girl dates a boy, which puts her virginity at risk.

Data provided by NSI with regard to girls under the age of 16 and 18 who live in cohabitation without being married does not contain information about the ethnic profiles of those girls. Therefore, we are going to analyze it in terms of the general trends, taking into account that a significant part of the data relates to Romani girls. Among them, according to expert evaluations, child marriages and births are much more frequent, if compared to other ethnic communities. However, it is necessary to note again that child marriages and early childbirths are far from being a prevailing practice among the Roma.

In 2001, 6181 girls under the age of 18 lived in cohabitation, 2283 of them being under 16. For a 10-year period, the number of girls under 18 years who live in cohabitation decreased with around 30%, and in 2011 their number is 4334. The decrease in the number of girls under 16 who live in cohabitation is above 33%, and were 1505 in 2011.



Source: NSI

In some cases of early marriages the girl ceases her education because of getting married and in other cases (more frequently) – because of her parents who expect her to get married or are scared that “the girl might be stolen“. This practice is common among some groups belonging to *Horahane Roma* (called *Turkish Gypsies*) in Eastern Bulgaria. The majority of them speak Turkish and prefer Turkish identity or the more neutral *Millet* identity. The last two censuses’ data shown in the tables below confirm that the highest number of underage girls in cohabitation is precisely in the regions

25 Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance “Amalipe”. 2011. Prevention of early marriages. Plovdiv: Astarta, p. 94.

where those Romani communities prevail – particularly high is their number in the regions of Burgas, Varna, Haskovo, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Sliven and Stara Zagora. More than half of the girls under 16 and 18 years of age who live in cohabitation reside in those regions.

Number of the girls living in cohabitation, according to the 2001 and 2011 census data

Regions	Girls under 16		Girls between 16 and 18	
	2001	2011	2001	2011
Total for the country	2283	1505	6181	4334
BLAGOEVGRAD	72	57	221	169
BURGAS	159	129	389	316
DOBRICH	116	82	335	241
GABROVO	72	56	251	134
HASKOVO	35	24	103	67
KARDZHALI	62	28	165	109
KYUSTENDIL	11	4	53	20
LOVECH	77	48	239	152
MONTANA	31	21	139	72
PAZARDZHIK	20	21	61	40
PERNIK	42	31	117	75
PLEVEN	61	28	174	117
PLOVDIV	142	100	422	325
RAZGRAD	15	8	45	34
RUSE	79	52	228	163
SHUMEN	173	112	544	405
SILISTRA	79	32	206	100
SLIVEN	50	28	172	86
SMOLYAN	65	43	172	106
SOFIYSKA	242	148	448	350
SOFIA	7	..	59	24
STARA ZAGORA	63	50	202	167
TARGOVISHTTE	61	41	203	156
VARNA	191	151	415	304
VELIKO TARNOVO	65	38	166	94
VIDIN	117	92	251	237
VRATSA	94	39	256	142
YAMBOL	82	42	145	119

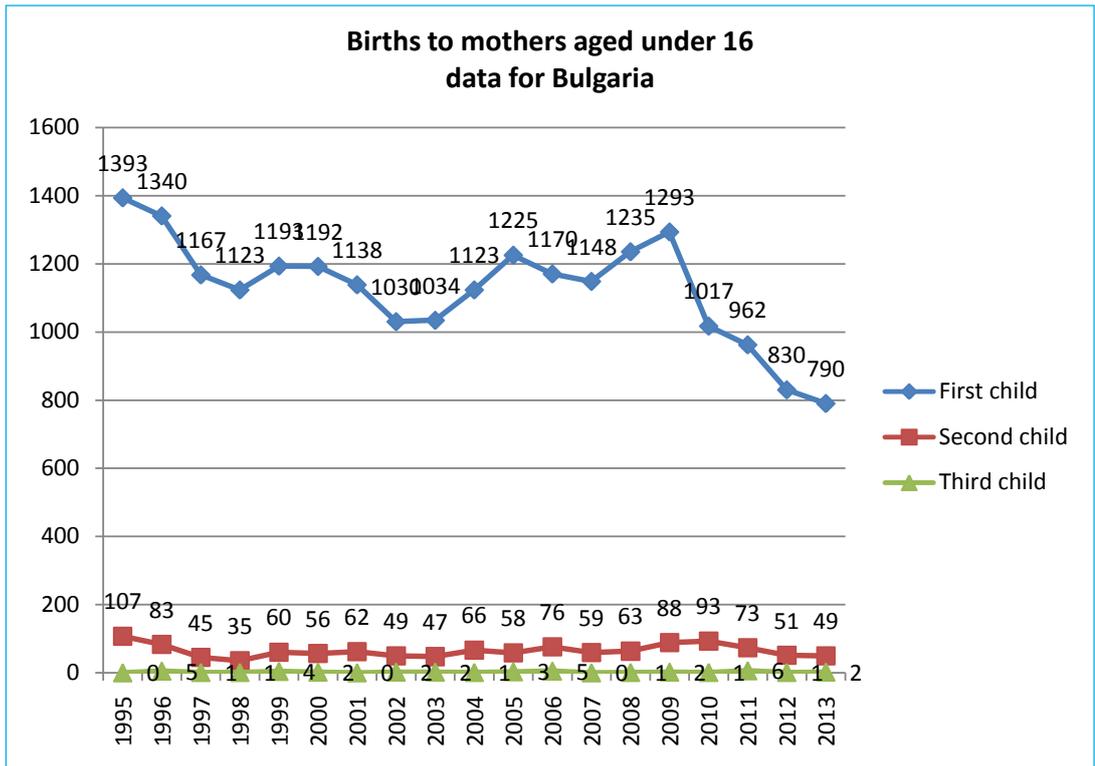
Child marriages are usually correlated to low educational status.



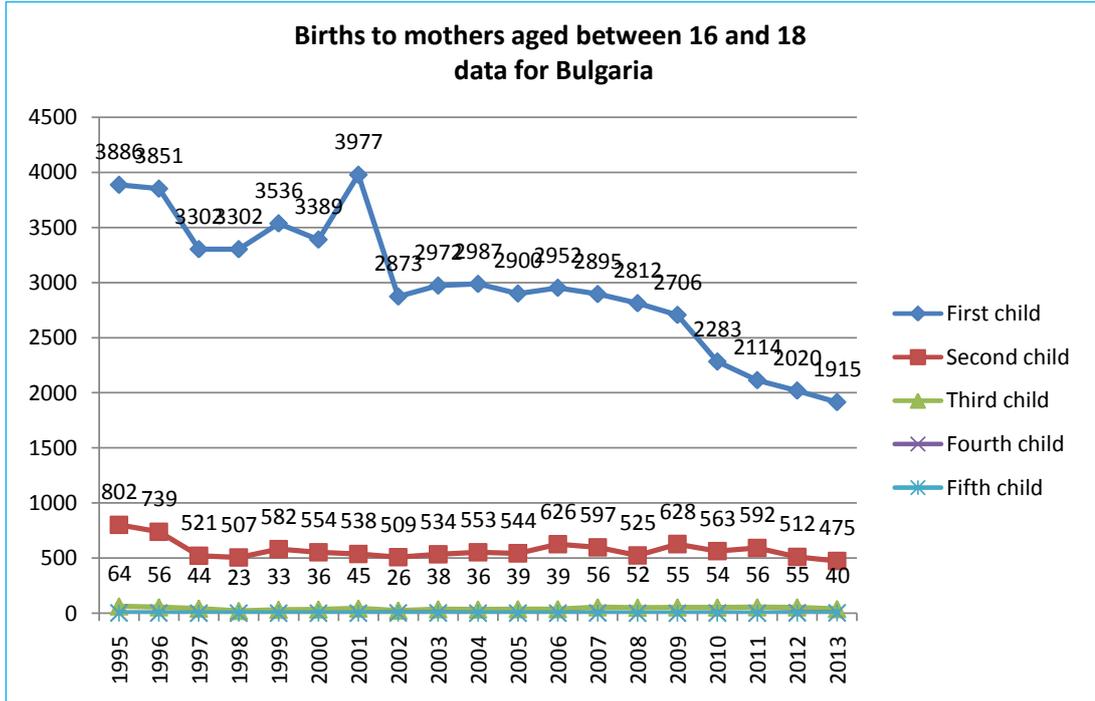
Source: NSI

Although the majority of married girls have only primary or lower education, a positive trend for an increase in the number of those completing primary school is registered. For example, among the girls under 16 years of age who live in cohabitation without being married, the percentage of those having completed primary school increases from 23,5% in 2001 to 27,5% in 2011. Among the girls under 18 years of age, in 2001 there were 42% with primary school education, whereas in 2011 the percentage was 45%. It should be also noted that the age difference of one-two years is of importance for the educational status; therefore, among girls between 16 and 18 who are living in cohabitation, the percentage of those with a completed primary school degree is considerably higher than the percentage of the 16-year-old girls who live in cohabitation.

Normally, marriage is followed by giving birth to a child one to two years later. The number of mothers younger than 16 or 18 who have given birth to their first child has decreased considerably in the last two years – a trend explained by the decrease of child marriages and cases of children in cohabitation. Within the last decade, the highest number of girls under 18 having given birth to a first child was 3999 (in 2009), 1293 of them being under the age of 16. In 2010 the number of mother under 18 is 3300, 1017 of them being girls under 16. Their number continued to decrease, and in 2013 the number of mothers under 18 who gave birth to a first child was 2705, 790 of them under 16. Although decreasing, the number of minor girls with a second and a third child remains too high – 665 in 2011 and 563 in 2012: with 16 of them under the age of 16, while in 2013 they were 524, 49 of them under the age of 16. It is alarming that children under 16 years of age give birth to their third child – in 2011, 6 girls became mothers of their third child and in 2012 and 2013 their number was 2 and 3, respectively.



Source: NSI



Source: NSI

Statistical data and the field research conducted in the three regions show that child marriages and early childbirths are the rarest in the region of Montana; more frequent, however, with a clear trend for a decrease, is this practice in the region of Shumen, and the most conservative one, with no serious indications for a change in this practice is the region of Sliven.

The number of child marriages and early births in **the region of Montana** is low in comparison to other regions. In the town of Montana, Ogosta District, there are no child marriages (with the exception of several families at Macedonia Street), and in Kosharnika District child marriages are

practiced mainly by poor families. For the groups of the *Kalaydzhii* from both districts early marriages are not a practice. For the *Reshetari* and *Koshnichari* the marital age has been increasing in the last two years, so the age after 16 is regarded acceptable. However, marriages of girls under the age of 16 are still possible. The issues observed in the research are mainly related to the lack of finances, low educational status of families, extreme poverty, and poor living conditions for some of the *Reshetari* and *Koshnichari*, as well as the lack of motivation for the acquirement of an educational level after primary education. The girls from the *Reshetari* and *Koshnichari* groups drop out of school due to getting married and to getting involved in the economic and household family activities. Families not living on the outskirts of the Kosharnik neighbourhood but among the *Kalaydzhii* more typically complete secondary education and become betrothed after the age of 18. Effective activities in terms of keeping the children inside the educational system are: a more active attitude on behalf of schools, interactive and sporting activities, and constant work with the families. Such activities are developed by organizations like the Sham Foundation in the town of Montana, and many of the young people indicate these desegregational efforts as a factor for their becoming more motivated and responsive to the educational process.

In Rakovitsa District, Berkovitsa, early marriage practice is widespread, the normal age at marriage being 14-16, as reported by informants and the local health mediator. Giving birth to a child before the age of 18 is not considered an early birth but something regular. Some of the girls who have completed primary education (as a result of being a part of the children included in desegregational activities) continue their secondary education in the town. Among the middle-aged females, the desire to change this practice exists. Youngsters are explicitly dependent economically on their parents, whose business (primarily trading) they become involved in. The eldest females in the family (mothers-in-law and grandmothers) are indicated as the most important factor in taking marriage decisions. Despite widespread evangelization, no success is observed in terms of changing this practice on behalf of the pastors.

In the village of Dolni Tsibar (Valchedram Municipality, Montana Region) child marriages are not a practice and secondary education is the lowest educational level that the young *Kalaydzhii* complete. Problems that the girls face there are related to the lack of finances for university education.

The region of Sliven takes one of the leading places in the number of minors who live in cohabitation as well as the number of underage girls who become mothers before reaching the age of 16 and 18. The reasons for all child marriages and the early childbirths in the two districts (Nikola Kochev and Nadezhda) are different. 16-17 is considered an acceptable marriageable age in Nikola Kochev District where a marriage is possible also due to pregnancy or pre-marital sexual intercourse. In Nadezhda District all groups practice early marriage and 12-14 is regarded as the typical age for marriage. However, the highest possibility for an increase of that age is observed in the *Musicians* group (yet lower than 16). Younger parents wish their daughters to study “at least till the eighth grade” and get married later. Nevertheless, they find it unacceptable before the community and fear that “our nation will start to comment on us”. Very positive in terms of motivation for education and improvement of the educational status is the influence of the Evangelic churches.

In the town of Nova Zagora girls study until the fifth or sixth grade, after which they stay home. The age between 12 and 14 is the standard for girls to get married, the decision for marriage being taken entirely by the boy's and girl's grandmother or mother.

The Roma in the village of Gradets (Kotel Municipality) share a common concern regarding their daughters studying in another town or village. Similar is the attitude of the Roma in the village of

Salamanovo (Shumen Municipality) and Zlatar (Veliki Preslav Municipality), the region of Shumen. In all three communities the Roma in the villages are definite that they would allow their daughters attend secondary schools if there were any such in their village. The droppings out of school are not a result of getting married, and the marriageable age here is above 16-17. In the town of Shumen child marriages are an exception and according to the 2011 census the number of girls under 18 who live in cohabitation is just 6 for the whole region. A relationship between a boy and a girl is absolutely acceptable and also a regular practice, if the requirement about keeping the girl's honour is respected and observed. Marriages under the age of 18 are unwanted and this is what all parents and grandparents explicitly state. The decision about the future spouse is entirely taken by the young people, the parents' interference is insignificant.

In Novi Pazar child marriages in the last years result primarily from economic reasons (girls coming from families that cannot ensure their living get married too young). Nevertheless, child marriage practice is generally accepted and not deprecated. All generations from all communities think that secondary education should be completed, so that the girl can work in order to ensure her family's living. The disposition within the community is, to a great extent, a result of the activity of the female Hayachi Association as well as of the everyday activities of Family Consultative Center in Novi Pazar.

There is no unified model in terms of the marriageable age among Romani communities. If with some of them getting married as a child is a practice from the past that should be treated with mockery, with others it is still a rule to follow. Generally, three models in terms of girls' age at marriage can be seen:

- The first one is characteristic with the widespread practice that the girls in the group settle down to married life at the age of 12 to 15. The eighth grade is the highest educational degree that can be achieved. However, it cannot be achieved by all girls (all the groups in Nadezhda District – Sliven, Shesti District – Nova Zagora, partially Rakovitsa District – Berkovitsa);
- The second one is characteristic with completing primary school as a standard, starting secondary school is also possible, and the age considered acceptable for marriage is after 16;
- The third one, for which completing a secondary school is the minimum, the practice of marriage as a whole is similar to that in the surrounding macro society.

What is alarming is the practice of dropping out of the educational system at the age of 12-13 because of marriage expectancy, and also the trend (in communities where child marriages are not a general practice) to marry the girls to wealthy boys as a strategy on behalf of the families in order to escape from poverty and ensure a better future for the girls. A similar trend is observed among Romani communities in Romania where Roma who traditionally do not marry their daughters at an early age, start doing it because of economic reasons.²⁶

Continuing one's education after getting married is very rare because of the requirements set before the girl in her role as a young daughter-in-law, skepticism on behalf of the mother-in-law and the husband, and a pregnancy. Whenever continuing education happens, it is usually the result of strenuous work on behalf of social and educational workers.

All communities regard early marriage (in particular, to a girl aged 12, 13 or 14) as getting married to a child and agree that a girl at that age does not have the necessary skills for raising her children. Such girls rely on their mothers-in-law for bringing up their child. Unlike some interlocutors who are ready to admit that a minor girl is neither physically developed nor mature enough to be a mother, most of the

26 Bițu, N., Morteau, C. 2010. Are the rights of the child negotiable? The case of Early Marriages among Roma Communities in Romania. Bucharest: UNICEF and Romani Criss.

Roma think that minor mothers give birth to healthy children and that an early birth is not risky for the mother or the foetus, giving examples of healthy babies born by child-mothers.

The trend for increasing the educational status of the Roma and the Romani girls has been observed in the last years. The number of child marriages and early births decreased as an absolute value as well as a percentage from all marriages and births. Child marriages are not the only reason for not enrolling in school or for dropping out of the educational system among the Roma. Observations on the educational level of the Roma and the educational attitude among the Romani community in the last decade reveal that, if for the elder generation getting married was the main reason for dropping out of school, in the last 20 years the reasons are problems related to the socioeconomic status of the family, the lack of financial means, and the low priority of education on behalf of the parents (the reasons being correlated). Therefore, it is necessary to research and examine not only the problem of child marriage as a part of the socio-normative system but also all ethno-cultural models and the attitude to education from the point of view of the Romani communities, so that those factors that influence the decision whether a girl would attend school can be determined. Special attention should be paid to the problems of the educational system itself and those of the various state institutions.

3.6. Educational factors related to ethno-culture and the way of living

Group-belonging and practices within the group are the most important socio-cultural factors influencing attitudes towards the educational status. There are additional factors that should not be disregarded like the local living conditions and the socioeconomic status. However, the commonly accepted group models are of the utmost importance.

The *Erlii* groups who form the community of the settled Roma are the most diverse and numerous community, having resided for ages among the settled population. Education gets widespread among them during the socialist period when a purposeful state policy in terms of “making the Gypsy population literate” was conducted. However, in some of the groups the educational practices commenced even earlier; for example, the Roma living at the time in the village of Dolni Tsibar and being part of the *Kalaydzhii* group in North-Western Bulgaria, used to attend schools in neighbouring villages even back in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁷

Among the groups belonging to the so called *Dasikane Roma*, Bulgarian Roma who are Christians and speak Bulgarian well, frequent problems related to dropping out of school, low educational level, and child marriages are the following: residing in segregated neighbourhoods where child marriages are a predominant practice and there is a lack of existing role models of educated girls who continue to study after the eighth grade (for example: all Roma groups in Nadezhda District in Sliven); studying in entirely Romani schools in segregated neighbourhoods where the low educational level demotivates both children and parents; poverty; poor interest on behalf of the parents as regards their children’s education; migration of the parents abroad or outside the place of residence.

One of the most important problems (which is, for example, widespread among *Dasikane Roma* residing in villages in the region of Dimitrovgad and Haskovo) is that only a primary school is available in the village or region of residence, thus making it impossible for the parents to ensure their daughter’s

²⁷ According to verbal testimonies of the Roma population in the village, as soon as that time their grandmother had attended school, even though they studied only through the first four grades; it is therefore not surprising that in the first decades after 1945 the village already has several university graduates, while enrolling at university became widespread after 1989.

living. Girls are compelled to get involved in the economic strategies of the family and start working after completing primary school or even earlier.

When it comes to *Horahane Roma*, the situation is different – the majority of *Horahane Roma* groups speak Turkish and prefer Turkish identity or *Millet* identity due to their historical development. Speaking Bulgarian is an issue for those children throughout the whole educational process which makes their motivation even lower. Popularization of education is a process characteristic for them as well during the socialist period, along with other processes aiming at socialization of the group, like education of young Romani women in the Fatherland Front schools, the organization of camps for the children in the neighbourhoods, the ensurance of employment for the women in the factories, etc.

However, in the last 25 years the opposite processes of capsulation/isolation of some of those groups take place, mainly due to the large-scale unemployment. For many of the girls in these groups getting married early is the only possible horizon for self-realization due to the fact that no other behavioral models for young girls exist in the groups. Many parents fear that their daughter “might be stolen” and this is also a frequent reason for dropping out after becoming sexually mature. This applies particularly to neighbourhoods with Turkish Gypsies in villages or segregated neighbourhoods with a considerable number of *Horahane Roma* population, in Central and Eastern Bulgaria (Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Haskovo, Nova Zagora, Burgas, and Varna). It is by no accident that these are also the regions where child marriages and early childbirths are the most frequent. In those communities even completing primary school is still an issue, explained by both the communities and the educational institutions as “such is their tradition“. Whenever education is continued in the eighth or the twelfth grade, completing school is celebrated as a festive day by the family, which gets integrated within the customs of the family.

The educational status of the *Kaldarashi* girls is low. Generally, the level of social integration in this group is the slightest, this being in no interrelation with the economic status of the group. School attendance in this group began after the 1960s, after settling in different parts of Bulgaria, scattered among the local population. Arranged marriages and paying ransom for the bride were practiced in this group, and moreover the girl might not be sexually mature yet. The young daughter-in-law would be raised by her mother-in-law and gets integrated in the economic strategies of the family very early, while the real marriage and the intercourse with her husband take place a few years later. For the girls in this group, completing secondary and university education is not considered acceptable; therefore, the ones who decide to complete high school or continue with university education (explicitly due to their own individual will) face the risk of not getting married within the group. For example, a girl from Aksakovo (small town near Varna in North-Eastern Bulgaria) who decided to continue her education despite her early marriage, does not get her husband’s and parents’ support, and was compelled to run away and dissolve her marriage in order to fulfill her plans. Another girl from Ruse with a university degree remained single and most probably no one from the group would have married her. Nevertheless, the educational level of the girls in this group is also slowly increasing. A university degree for men is considered acceptable by the community.

The educational models of the *Rudari/Ludari/Kopanari* are similar to those “of the Bulgarians” in accordance to their own words; child marriages are not an issue except in rare cases of communities that reside in remote village neighbourhoods (like the village of Staro Oryahovo and the town of Dolni Chiflik, Dolni Chiflik Municipality, Varna Region). Education is highly appreciated and children are encouraged to complete secondary school in those families. The problematic issues in this group are related mainly to poverty and migration of the parents abroad.

Other important factors for the difference in the models and practices in terms of education and child marriages in the cases of identical group belonging are the following:

- **Reasons related to the honour of the girl and the family:** the honour of the girl is of the utmost importance both for her and her whole family in terms of the community. Therefore, keeping it is of a key importance when taking a decision about continuing education. The most important requirement of each family is the availability of a suitable environment for a single girl. In some *Horahane Roma* communities, especially in big Romani neighbourhoods, parents are concerned that their girl might communicate with boys too much, or that she might “be stolen” at school, therefore they prefer that she stay at home until reaching a certain age (between 12 and 16), in order to get prepared in a suitable environment about her future life as a good wife. Girls study until the eighth grade in other villages and remote places of residence distant from towns and do not continue their education in the central part of the city or in the neighbouring town (again because of parental concerns that their virginity might be violated in the big town where young people are sexually active).

In my opinion, the way for ceasing this practice is: First, a few girls start their secondary education in a near-by town in order to be able to get home at the end of the day, so that their parents do not worry, and (as a result of this) the number of girls attending schools will increase each year. Second (often resulting from 1), completing secondary education gradually becomes a popular practice for all children in the community. Another practice related to the honour of the girl and her family and more characteristic of the *Dasikane Roma* groups, is to get the girl married because of parents' fear that they might lose control of the child, resulting in pre-marital intercourse. For example, in Rakovitsa District, Berkovitsa and Nadezhda District, Sliven, many mothers of young girls proceed with getting them married once they happen to find out that their daughters are associating with boys in the street or in cafes, being afraid that the boys might have sexual intercourse with them. In Komluka District in Sliven, where the bride's honour requirement is a norm not kept by all youngsters, if the parents of the girl find out that she has had an intimate relationship with her boyfriend, they will insist on marriage, otherwise she would remain single.

- **The type of the place of residence:** the life of the group inside a village or a remote city neighbourhood where only a primary school exists, may contribute to the girls' dropping out after eighth grade, due to ethno-cultural (related to fear from losing virginity), or economic reasons (the lack of means for living). For example, one and the same type of groups, like those of the *Musicians* or *Gadzhikane (Turkish) Roma* have a different type of behaviour towards girls' education in the town of Shumen and in the villages near Shumen. Among both groups in Shumen, as a result of the processes in the last 20 years, completing twelfth grade is already desired and considered a good practice that might ensure a better future for a girl, whereas a village girl who attends school in the town after completing eighth grade is regarded as contradicting the behavioral norms of the family because she enters an environment where sex life among youngsters is an accepted and frequent practice. Respectively, the girls who live in towns get married a few years later, in comparison to those who live in villages. For example, *Horahane Roma* and *Musicians* groups in Shumen think that a girl can get married after 18 or 20 years of age, whereas, according to the same groups in the villages around Shumen, the desirable age at marriage for a girl is after 16; however, after reaching the age of 18, she is already considered “a spinster”.
- **Residence and education in a segregated neighbourhood:** Romani children from one and the same group have different educational levels depending on whether they reside or study in a

segregated neighbourhood. Even just studying in a mixed environment leads to a different level of education, providing also alternative models and norms of behaviour, while residing in isolation leads to getting familiar and practicing only the norms of the community. For the Roma living in segregated neighbourhoods, the age at marriage is changing slower than in Romani communities from smaller towns or villages. The remoteness of the segregated neighbourhoods, the presence of a Romani school, and the socioeconomic isolation of the majority of families lead to a kind of a capsulation of the community and its norms. In smaller towns and villages the communities from the same group seem to be much more open to changes. The age at marriage is increasing more dynamically there as well due to changing attitudes about girls' education.

- **Family migration and living in macro society:** the migration of families from all groups in terms of distance (related also to education in Bulgarian schools and getting the Roma children familiar with the macro society models) provides more alternatives for realization without contradicting ethnic identity. Examples can be given from all Romani groups but the most interesting ones are in the so called *Darvari* or *Gradeshki Gypsies* – girls who reside with their parents and complete their education in big towns like Haskovo and Veliko Tarnovo, and who explicitly refuse to get married before completing basic education. In the case of a marriage proposal (or “stealing”), they reject them in order to pursue their own plans, unlike those who have been brought up in the village of Gradets for whom, most frequently, the primary school diploma is an educational degree that is high enough.

Similar is the situation in terms of **migrating abroad**: residing in a different environment where they do not feel discriminated and where a series of extracurriculum activities take place, children are willing to attend school with pleasure and their parents make plans for continuing their education, seeing it as social capital for an integration into that environment. Roma with Turkish identity who originate from Southern Bulgaria (Nova Zagora, Peshtera) and whose girls usually attend school to the fourth or fifth grade, or the eighth grade at the most, if living abroad, also encourage their daughters to attend school and say that they do not fear that “someone might steal them” because there are “laws in the other countries”, also taking into account the fact that the amount of child allowance they receive contributes substantially to the family budget.

- **Education of the parents:** undoubtedly, the educational status of the parents is linked to their attitude towards education. It is interesting to note that the educational level of the parents is already turning into a negative example for their children. Many young mothers from all groups share that they “do not want their daughters to suffer”, “to be illiterate” like themselves and are determined to educate their children, even if they have to deny marriage proposals coming from families within the community.
- **Economic factors:** the lack of finances to provide for girls (and boys) is a reason for ceasing their education after the eighth grade, particularly in places where only primary schools exist. After completing eighth grade, girls stay at home and help their parents in the household or get involved in the economic strategies of the family (for example, gathering mushrooms, herbs, etc.).

It is disturbing that in certain areas the economic reasons lead to an early marriage of the daughter in the family as “a strategy for an escape from poverty”. Girls from poorer families get married in wealthier families, their parents usually thinking that this way they help their children to get a better life.

At the same time, the above problems are not related only to child marriages or to the specific ethno-

culture of Romani communities, but also to some more general issues. Problems related to the educational system include: lack of secondary schools in the place of residence; the low educational level in “Gypsy schools” which demotivates both students and parents; the lack of extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs and interactive activities; the overall devaluation of education in the country and the conviction that its level is getting constantly lower and that diplomas are of no use because of the large-scale unemployment. The interlocutors in the Romani communities also note other, more general issues, like the feeling that “there is no state [authority]“, there is neither control nor observance of the law; the lack of professional realization even after graduating with the highest educational degree; the large-scale unemployment and discrimination when applying for a job.

4. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK, PRACTICES, POLICIES AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS



4.1. Legislation in the fields of education, social assistance, and protection of the child's rights

According to the Public Education Act (PEA), school education in Bulgaria is compulsory until the age of 16 (Art.7) and “does not allow any restrictions or privileges based on racial or sexual features, ethnic or social origin, religion, and social status” (Art.4, para.2). In the case of non-attendance at school, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) should implement due activities, among which notification of the municipality and its “Social Assistance” Directorate. According to Art.47 of the PEA, parents, guardians and custodians who do not secure the child’s regular presence at kindergarten or primary school for the mandatory time shall be punished by a fine in the amount of 20 to 100 levs. In the case of repeated violation, the fine shall vary from 50 to 250 levs and there shall be sanctions by the municipality in the form of legislative acts, with punitive decrees issued by the Mayor (Art.48 of the PEA).

In terms of prevention of school dropouts, according to Art.43 (2) of the PEA, the MES should provide additional education options for the students at risk of dropping out. According to other norms, school attendance is legally bound to the social benefits and child allowances received by the families – if a student gets more than five unexcused absences from school for the month, the family does

not receive the due allowance of 35 levs. Municipalities are legally obliged to secure compulsory education until the age of 16 (Art.36, para.1 of the PEA). The PEA imposes on the President of the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) the following responsibilities: maintaining a register of children at risk and children not enrolled in school (Art.17a), with due coordination and support of state-executive and other local institutions by means of developing and monitoring the implementation of national and regional child protection programs; monitoring and analyzing the implementation of the state policy on child protection and providing methodological guidance to the Child Protection Departments in the “Social Assistance” municipal directorates, including due compliance with the child’s rights; developing, participation in discussions on and drafting of legislative acts in the field of child protection; maintaining a national information system for children at risk, children not enrolled in school, and other data relevant to child protection (such as: cases of minor mothers, cohabitation with underage youngsters, etc.).

A locally specialized body for implementing the child protection policy within a municipality is the “Social Assistance” Directorate, where a Child Protection Department gets created. The unit works in cooperation and coordination with state authorities, individuals and legal entities whose main activity is child protection (art.20 of the CPA). Some of the legal functions of the “Social Assistance” Directorate (Art.21 of the CPA) are: to perform the current practical child-protection activities in the municipality and file proposals for child-protection programs at the municipal council; to define and pursue concrete child protection measures and monitor their implementation; to investigate complaints and signs of child-rights violation and issue binding instructions for its termination under the conditions set in the regulations for law implementation; to provide consulting and advice on child raising and education; to give information on the services offered and render assistance and support to parents/families of children in need; to compile and update with actual data registers of children not enrolled in school; to support the professional orientation and training of children at risk, including those who might have completed their secondary education after coming of lawful age; when necessary, to alert the police, the prosecution and the court authorities who are required to take immediate action and protect the child.

We would confirm the conclusion expressed in several expert reports that, in some cases, the allocation of responsibilities and tasks between different institutions and levels of competence or authority lead to lack of coherence and poor coordination of the institutions’ actions.²⁸

The existing legislative framework seems comprehensive and detailed enough in terms of rights and responsibilities, yet coordination between the institutions in charge still lacks, probably also due to the lack of existing practices. It is striking, for example, that too many responsibilities get imposed on the “Social Assistance” Directorates, while the units seem to be short of capacity and human resources. On the one hand, there is lack of social workers’ competence: many seem to consider early marriages and school dropouts as a typical Roma tradition. According to a survey on the attitude of 260 employees of the Agency for Social Assistance, experts from the Child Protection Department, and other social workers conducted during the project “Prevention of child marriages”, 50% of the respondents report child marriages as a “typically Roma” and “community-driven”.²⁹

On the other hand, in most of these directorates qualified Roma are not hired, those who could be recognized by the locals as activists or social-service providers in favour of their communities.

28 Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance Amalipe. 2011. Prevention of early marriages. Plovdiv: Astarta; UNICEF. 2013. Lost future? Study of the phenomenon of non-enrolling in school. Sofia: UNICEF, p. 63..

29 Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe”. 2011. Prevention of early marriages. Plovdiv: Astarta, p. 28.

Romani groups often see the institutions only as sanctioning representatives of the state. In Shumen, for example, families who could benefit from the day-center services at the municipality refuse to show up on the argument that the social workers might find a good reason for taking their child simply because the Child Protection Department is localized next-door (such is the case with poor families or children raised by their grandparents).

Although some places demonstrate exceptional examples of effective cooperation between local authorities and school institutions, in most cases the authorities do not tend to pursue their responsibilities regarding students who are subject to compulsory education or fines imposed on parents whose children do not attend school. Apart from Nova Zagora, despite the common practice among Romani girls to stop their education at fifth grade, the researched sites offer no proof of any municipal sanctions with regards to children who are subject to compulsory education, yet do not attend school.

A typical case of school dropout can start even at fourth grade. First, the teacher visits the family who claim that the child doesn't want to attend, and then a signal is sent by the CPD about the child at risk – they can summon the parent to ask why the child is not sent to school, and that's all they can do within the limits of their power. We may ask the Mayor to fine the parents, yet the procedure takes two months for three forms to be completed, the parents to be found and made to sign, with witnesses present, the class teacher, and the director. Then we have to wait, if an appeal gets filed within a certain period, and photocopies of the class register are made in proof of the systematic absence. In the end, just a fine of 50 levs is obtained. With such a pile of paperwork, I have no information if it has been collected, but none of the 12 children has ever shown up...

(Assistant Director, Nova Zagora)

Local authorities themselves consider the completion of eighth grade as the highest possible achievement and do not take any steps for securing attendance of children under 16 years who are subject to or have already completed the eighth grade. The only action in favour of continuing the education of the Roma in such cases is taken on the part of vocational or technical schools, as they visit primary schools in order to attract students after the eighth grade.

Binding the child allowances with due school attendance is defined as an effective measure by local educators, activists and Roma families. However, Child Protection Departments are particularly ineffective as regards the most marginalized families of Roma neighbourhoods with whom neither the alleged regular checks of the education inspectorate, nor the risk of losing the social allowance seems to work, since such measures are not applied at all or are incorrectly applied, according to a 2011 study of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.³⁰

On the other hand, there is also the problem with timely measures on the part of schools – sometimes their reaction is too late (upon finding out the girl has married, or after her being absent from school for months) or there is no reaction at all, due to an existing practice of tolerating unexcused absences and maintaining lists of “dead souls” (which contributes to keeping a larger budget per capita, but is not in favour of the students). Such practices are particularly alarming in the so-called “Gypsy schools” with education-quality problems that have been voiced repeatedly and publicly. These schools are located in Romani neighborhoods or rural areas that have become Roma-populated due to changes in the settlement's demographics. For example, at the school in Rakovitsa District (town of Berkovitsa),

30 Kukova, S. 2011. Roma children at risk in the system of child protection in Bulgaria. Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, p. 25

children simply leave their backpacks in the classroom and consider themselves to be free. According to youngsters who, during school year 2013/14, completed their eighth grade at “Captain Peter Parmakov” school in the village of Gradets, the class consisted of “28 registered, but 16 in attendance total“. According to Roma activists and experts in the segregated schools from Montana city and Berkovitsa, the practice of maintaining feigned lists involves tacit agreement and participation of all institutions: school, regional inspectorate, municipality (just for the sake of preserving the delegated budget) and is the very basis for lack of due measures and sanctions in favour of the students. According to Ognyan Isaev, a representative of the Roma Education Fund in Bulgaria, “there is a cartel agreement between parents and the school” since the parents need a document certifying their childrens’ regular attendance, while the school needs a sufficient number of students in conjunction with the delegated budget. Therefore, such schools do not send any signals for children at risk and hide the absence of non-attending children.

According to Roma experts and activists working at the local level, there is a necessary link between dropouts from compulsory education to more sanctions, following the example of linking school attendance to children’s allowances, which had proved to be a workable mechanism for retention in school. They also suggest compulsory education completion to be bound to more requirements:

If compulsory education could be extended up till tenth grade and bound with getting a driving license, it would be great. If a few more issues related to the needs of these people could be legally bound with tenth grade, the situation could be altered, albeit via an artificial type of change. If you haven’t completed tenth grade, you cannot start a job, or – if you don’t have tenth grade, you cannot get a driving license – this will have an effect. However, this is not being done, as a much greater responsibility will then fall on the shoulders of the state.

(Roma activist)

At certain places, Roma families validated the above motives: “I tell her: only dare not go to school; last month she had six unexcused absences and the debit card was empty!” Roma families also confirm that obligatory completion of primary education in order to obtain a driver’s license is one of the main reasons for encouraging their sons to study up to the eighth grade. For the same reason, among youngsters over the age of 16 who have dropped out of school before completion of primary education, there is a desire to complete the eighth grade by enrolling in self-study programmes of education. This measure leads to increased school attendance and higher educational status among Roma boys, since driving skills are still considered a “man’s job“, while girls rarely tend to have a driver’s license.

4.2. Criminal Code and Case Law

The legal framework of Bulgaria will be reviewed with regards to actions related to conjugal cohabitation with a partner, since it seldom refers to a legally valid marriage which, according to the Family Code, gets authorized only for adults and for children over the age of 16 whose parents’ consent has been explicitly given.

Art.191 of the Criminal Code (CC) defines the composition of the crime “conjugal co-habitation with a partner“, which is the case with most marriages in Roma communities: an adult who, without getting legally married, cohabits sexually with a female under the age of 16, shall be punished with up to two years of imprisonment or probation and a public reprimand (para.1). If the under-age person is

under the age of 14, the punishment shall be imprisonment for two to five years. Also, an adult, who persuades or facilitates a under-age person under the age of 16 to live conjugally, shall be punished with up to two years imprisonment or probation. If the girl is under the age of 14, regardless of whether upon her own will or that of her parents, such coexistence implies sexual intercourse and, therefore, falls under Art.151 of the Criminal Code, which provides for a penalty of two to six years for the offender. If such cohabiting is against the girl's will, a sexual intercourse with her qualifies as a rape (Art.152 of the Criminal Code) and will be punished more severely, with imprisonment for a period of three to ten years, and if a girl under the age of 14 is involved – with imprisonment for a period of 10 to 20 years, even in the cases where a under-age offender is involved.³¹

The society and the professional jurisdictional community share the opinion that the common case of committing crimes under Art.191 of the Criminal Code “relates to the customs and traditions of the Roma ethnic group whose members – in most cases – lack the objective awareness of committing an unlawful act”.³² Consequently, despite the existence of criminal liability even before 2010, district prosecutors refuse to prosecute a penalty-procedure decree for offenders cohabiting conjugally with an under-age girl, their official refusal being motivated by the offender's ethnicity (including cases of Roma traditions and customs) and also grounded on the view that this is a typical “Roma tradition” or “tradition of the ethnic community”.³³

In reaction to these official refusals in 2010, SACP alerted the Attorney General and ASA's Executive Director about the worrying tendency of a growing number of child marriages and births in the country, under-age maternity, and increasing cases of conjugal cohabitation with minor and under-age females. As a result, the Attorney General issued the Methodological Guidelines for improving the prosecutorial activity in terms of formation and termination of criminal proceedings under Art.151, para.1 and Art.191, para.3 of the Criminal Code (№5092/2010 of 06.12.2010) which is rendered to the heads of the District Prosecution offices of Bulgaria.

In March 2011, in response to SACP's letter signed by the ASA's Executive Director, another set of Methodological Guidelines was issued and rendered to the attention of SAD/CPD units in the country, instructing them to notify the relevant District Prosecutor's Office in all cases of conjugal cohabitation. Specific actions are administered, as it was realized that most social and medical workers fail to recognize child marriages and early childbirths as a problem. In November 2009, the issue gets submitted to the local institutions and authorities concerned, when the “Integro” Roma Association and the ERGO network (European Roma Grassroots Organizations) decide to file a petition against the judiciary neglect of the child marriage problem, urging the Prosecutors Office and other institutions to apply the law equally to all citizens and stop ignoring cases of child and forced marriages.³⁴

A legal agreement for cooperation and exchange of information between the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria and the SACP was concluded in 2014, aiming to improve the interaction and cooperation between the two institutions, with one of its points mentioning the periodic exchange of information and plans for adequate measures and activities in order to guarantee compliance with the rights of children who are pregnant and minor mothers.

31 The different classification of crime and degree of punishment in Art.191 and Art.151 of the Criminal Code leads to the following absurd – if the offender, in this case – the male Roma adolescent, has not yet come of age, he is liable only under Art.151 of the CC which provides for a severer punishment, i.e. his criminal liability would be harsher than that of an adult offender..

32 Yordanova, R. 2012. Living in marriage-type of relationship with a female, under the age of 16, as a crime, according to Art.191, Law review p. 12, 20-26, p. 25-26.

33 Interview with Kamelia Nikolova, SACP's General Directorate “Control of the child rights”.

34 Bulgarian Prosecutor to tackle early marriages, 27 April 2011:<http://www.ergonetwork.org/ergo-network/news/096/000000/Bulgarian-Prosecutor-to-tackle-early-marriages/>

As a result of the SACP's actions, there has been an abrupt change in the Prosecution's attitude towards childbirths due to underage maternity. Effective sentences amounted to 267 in 2012 and 387 in 2013, with only few of the offenders justified and released. According to data collected by the SACP in the period 01.01.2013 to 09.30.2013, seven districts of the country (Sofia-city, Sofia region, Burgas, Varna, Vratsa, Plovdiv, and Ruse) registered 860 births by under-age mothers under the age of 18, with 24 delivered by infant mothers (under the age of 14). SAD received 470 filed sign of under-age maternity, while the number of those not filed was 388.

The most important factor in provoking action on the part of the Prosecution's Office and triggering local authorities and institutions to take measures as regards under-age maternity is the SACP. However, the main problem is that steps are taken only upon evidence of conjugal cohabitation with an under-age (proved via medical examination or at birth) without any efforts on an institutional level for due prevention of such marriages or concrete measures that would not allow for a child marriage.

During the research we also tried to answer questions pertaining to whether any criminal sanctions imposed would have a preventive effect among communities with common cases of conjugal cohabitation and how strong the Roma community's awareness is regarding the law on marriages and cohabitation with children. The Roma families, as well as the local and national Roma activists with whom I spoke, provided two opinions. The dominant view was that the imposition of sanctions under the Criminal Code would have a positive effect on lowering the rate of child marriages and which would diminish due to fear of their illegal nature. The other opinion was that, if applied, the sanctions would not have any direct or continuous impact on such relationships in the community. However, a unanimous viewpoint was voiced that child marriages are wrongly presented as a tradition characteristic of the Roma and that all offenders should be held equally liable under the laws in Bulgaria:

Whatever the prosecution may say, it is simply washing its hands rather than doing its job. I would very much like to see someone convicted for having had sex with an under-age. But no, it is The Tradition! And who has provided that information, what expert do they rely on? It is not our tradition. If we go back in time, we will see this was typical of the Bulgarians, as it relates to a certain level of development of the community ... It was typical of the Bulgarians some 100-150 years ago, when they used to make sweet brandy, so this is not a Roma feature, the Roma borrow from the people they live with, in order not to differ from them. Now life is much more dynamic, there are fast changes with the opening of borders and the Internet, things alter very rapidly, and the age level [for marriage] goes up.

(Ognyan Isaev, Roma journalist and activist,
representative of the Roma Education Fund – REF for Bulgaria)

It is necessary to point out that despite the institutional stereotype that the Roma people “are unaware of performing an unlawful act”, the researched Romani communities proved to be well aware of the legal side of the matter. It is interesting that Roma parents do reach out to state institutions such as the CPD, the police, and the prosecution, whenever their daughter runs away with a boy who has not been approved as a spouse (either because of being part of a family with a bad reputation, or due to being from another group) or whenever the girl's parents do not want to marry her, considering her too young.

We came across suggestions for legislative changes heard among the local Roma activists in connection with the Criminal Code and the due criminalization of cohabitation and sexual intercourse

with minors. First, they believe that state prosecutors still remain passive in the case of filed notifications about child marriages, since it considers this a Roma tradition or feels demotivated to engage with the issue, as the girl's parents usually agree with the cohabitation and have blessed the marriage, and in the case of a lawsuit with an effective sentence and a fine, they usually pay without any problem. The activists working at the local level think that there should be more proactive measures taken on the part of the police and the Prosecution, as the police monitor the neighborhoods and know very well what happens inside. Yet, instead of filing a report, "the policeman is sitting at their table, drinking sweet brandy with them, so what action do you expect him to take?" (team of the "Hayachi" Association in the town of Novi Pazar). The proposals for changes refer a recommendation for observation of the existing norms; i.e. the institutions should be made to comply with the regulations.

In terms of punishment, even stronger sanctions with an effective sentence may be heard in many of the sites' recommendations – not only for the offender who cohabits with a minor, but also for the girl's parents and her spouse's parents who accepted her as a daughter-in-law: "they should be sentenced to a short imprisonment of 15 days or, alternatively, some kind of a community service." According to most of the experts (mediators, NGO activists, social workers) who took part in the meetings in Sliven and Novi Pazar, financial sanctions could possibly be combined with an effective sentence, via an expedited procedure, which would serve as a reprimand before the community and reduce the number of under-age marriages. They believe that the cases when such decisions are taken by the youngsters will also decrease, since the young men will be brought up with threats by their parents to avoid marrying a girl before she has completed the age of 18. The same opinion is shared by most members of the community, though there were a few reservations that sanctions could lead to change.

My personal opinion is that the above views are influenced by the public discourse adopted by institutions and reproduced in the media, stating that negative trends in society should be addressed via sanctions and severe punishment. Actually, far more appropriate and adequate would be a community-friendly approach and measures with participation of people from the community who would help to observe the natural process for achieving a higher average marriageable age as a result of Roma groups' development and creates a mass-model for youngsters who have completed primary and secondary education. A strong argument in this respect is the fact that norms with special legislation, decrees, and decisions to combat child marriages among Gypsies have existed for decades and were applied under the socialist regime,³⁵ and even today, yet the practice has neither diminished, nor disappeared.

In many places, a change of the tendency can be already observed, not as a result of potential or already imposed sanctions, but due to gradual popularization of a higher educational level among the girls and presenting completion of education as an important part of the life-cycle. The effect of punitive measures would not be positive for a Romani girl either. In communities where such crimes are sentenced, the young family's situation can only worsen, since the husband is either fined (most often) or imprisoned, as a result of which he cannot fulfill his basic role – providing for the family. According to a study of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) held among children in crisis centers, two Romani girls who got accommodated during their parents' and spouses' trial, expressed harsh surprise why they should be housed that way, if their own wish had been to get married in the first place. They regarded the stay in the centre as a punishment for their marriage, which made

35 Stoyanova, P. 2014. "Wedding customs among Roma in Bulgaria and the attempts by the socialist power to deal with them", Report of the third International Congress on Bulgaristics, Sofia 2013, 23-26 May.

them feel like criminals in prison. Both of the girls attempted to escape in order to reunite with their families.³⁶

4.3. Strategic documents and analyses that address the problem

Several program documents adopted on a government level address the problem of school dropouts, including those of Romani girls. According to the National Strategy for the Child 2008-2018, for solving the issue of the “adherence to certain cultural stereotypes, especially if a family lives in a compact group, among members of their own ethnicity” and the tendency for school dropouts, the following steps and measures are planned:

3. Changing the attitude towards girls’ and women’s role in family and society and ensuring observation of their right for development and equality by:

3.1. Developing a “map of the problem” – regions, social and ethnic groups where girls’ rights have been violated;

3.2. Developing adequate approaches for increasing issue-sensitivity on different levels – family, community – in order to overcome the problem;

3.3. Monitoring and control by the institutions to ensure respect and observation of girls’ rights – on the part of the system for child protection and the local authorities;

3.4. Imposing restrictive measures on families who violate or allow violation of girls’ rights;

3.5. Developing and implementing incentives for encouragement of families who permanently alter their initial discriminatory attitude towards girls;

Part “Education” of the National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2012-2020, the operational objective of which is “Inclusion and retention of Roma children in the education system, provision of quality education in a multicultural educational environment“, does not explicitly discuss the problem of child marriages as a reason for dropping out of school, nor does it mention a particular need to work on the prevention of such. However, the strategy provides a series of activities in contribution to the enrollment of more Romani children in the education system. Their application can lead to a rise in the educational status of Romani girls and indirectly cause a reduction in child marriages:

...

8. Developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy for the prevention of child dropouts from the system of education and for reintegration of children who already dropped out of school, including Roma children.

...

17. Encouraging Roma families to build the right environment for raising and educating their children and outlining life-goals aimed at personal and professional development.

18. Attracting Roma parents to join the educational process and participate actively in the school life. Promoting education as a family value.

19. Working with non-Roma parents in order to explain the mutual benefits of the educational

36 FRA – European Union Agency for Human Rights. 2015. Child-friendly justice, perspectives and experiences of professionals. Luxembourg: Publication office of the EU..

*integration of Roma children.*³⁷

Part “Healthcare” of the Strategy pays special attention to the problem of child marriages and early childbirths, recommending development of the following program solutions:

13. Creating conditions for the improvement of sexual and reproductive health. Conducting targeted informative activities to explain the risks of underage marriage and pregnancy.

Adopted in June, 2015, the Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2015-2020) and the Action Plan for its implementation also does not address explicitly the issue of early marriages. The focus, however, is on certain measures that would have an indirect, positive effect – working with parents, extracurricular activities, prevention, student support, involvement of young people in the work-activities with children at risk of dropping out of school, etc. According the Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2015-2020), among these steps and measures are the following:

1.1. Information campaigns among parents and the public about the mutual benefits of the educational integration of children from ethnic minorities – in regions with mixed ethnic population.

...

1.4. Formation of parental clubs and school boards with the participation of parents from ethnic minorities.

...

1.7. Information campaigns for attracting youngsters with a diploma for secondary or higher education who come from vulnerable ethnic communities to participate as volunteers in the work with children at risk of dropping out.

...

2.11. Construction and operation of a system for prior warning on school dropouts.

2.12. Additional work with students from ethnic minorities at risk of dropping out and/or early school leaving.

2.13. Supporting students from vulnerable ethnic communities to continue their education in high school.

...

*3.1. Development of a state educational standard (SES) for civil, intercultural and health education.*³⁸

Most specific are the measures mentioned in the Action Plan in the period 2011-2015 for the Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities. According to it, in order to reduce teenage pregnancy and secure prevention of congenital anomalies or hereditary diseases, institutions should hold discussions with adolescents, young people and also with their parents on how to prevent unwanted or early pregnancy, on the dangers of underage pregnancy for the mother and baby; on the risk of babies born with congenital anomalies or hereditary diseases, as well as on the prophylactics. The institutions responsible for the Strategy implementation are the Ministry of Health, the regional health inspectors, health mediators and GPs, with 250 lectures per year for a total budget of 10 000 levs.

37 National strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for the integration of Roma (2012-2020), p. 7-8.

38 Action Plan for the Strategy on Educational Integration of children and students from ethnic minorities (2015 – 2020).

The Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020) draws attention to the need to increase awareness and sensitivity of parents and students to the mandatory nature of education by: implementing the control functions of municipalities on the obligatory attendance of kindergarden and primary school; providing additional educational opportunities for students at risk of dropping out; control over the fulfillment of pedagogical teams' obligation for constant contact, communication and informing of the parents on their child's development and progress as a student; coordination and cooperation with the local "Social Assistance" Directorate as per the current address of the student, increasing the school boards' activity. The Action Plan for the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020) for the period 2014 – 2015 addresses the problem of early marriages in section III and advises policies for intervention in early school leaving, part 2.1., as well as increasing the participation and involvement of parents. Among the prescribed measures are:

2.1.2. Special cares for the prevention of early marriages and early births.

2.1.2.1. Conducting interviews with adolescents and their parents on how to prevent early pregnancy, on the dangers of early pregnancy for the mother and baby, on the risk of giving birth to babies with congenital anomalies, hereditary diseases.

It is noticeable, that the measures refer to the Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities (2005-2015) and the contractors to implement the measures should be local authorities, the Ministry of Health and its regional inspectorates.

Recommendations on measures aimed at reduction of child marriages and girls' dropouts of the education system, with a focus on certain vulnerable ethnic groups (item.10.2) and data collection on the number of child marriages, the raising of awareness in Roma communities on the prohibition of child marriages, the prosecution and punishment of cases of any forced or child marriages (item.16.2) are included in the Action Plan for Implementation of the Final Recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), with a deadline for its execution until 2016.

The problem of child marriages as a reason for dropping out of school is discussed in a number of other plans and strategic documents at regional and municipal level. Despite the prescribed steps, concrete activities on the prevention of child marriages have so far been addressed only in a few projects and initiatives of NGOs.

4.4. Practices and initiatives for prevention among Romani communities

The largest, albeit limited in time, initiative was implemented in 2010 by the "Amalipe" Center within the frame of a regional project for prevention of early marriages among Roma communities. Campaigns were carried out in ten Roma neighborhoods, with the participation of informal leaders and local educated youths, and a short documentary was prepared. During the campaigns held in the ten local communities, useful practices were established, including "coffee talks/discussions", "door-to-door", successful Roma's personal examples, transformation of schools into more attractive and pleasant places for quality education, creating motivation for education, and more active work by institutions and local community centers on raising the awareness of family planning. After the project, the prepared film which tells the stories of several girls, got widespread attention in Roma neighborhoods. The "Amalipe" Center defines prevention of early marriages as one of the focuses of its work among Roma communities and schools – the topic is included in their work with parents, in

the discussions about the community and its youth, and in the documentary projected. The Center works for protection of the rights of underage girls who are victims of violence on the part of their husbands, as well as for reintegration into the education system of girls who have dropped out due to early marriage and got divorced.

Another short animated film called “Emmy and Annie”³⁹ was created with the participation of Roma and released in 2014 under the initiative of the Family Consultative Centre in the town of Shumen and the Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association (BFPA), aimed at prevention of early dropouts, child marriages, and early births.

Some community-based organizations also develop activities that are directly or indirectly related to child marriages. For example, the Romani Women Association “Hayachi” in the town of Novi Pazar organizes discussions with the community that aim to prevent child marriages, with the participation of institutional representatives such as municipal officials, and the police. The association also holds regular lectures and informal “coffee talks/discussions” with the older women of the community who are key figures for any family decisions on the holding of marriages, customs, etc. The team of “Hayachi” follows each of the cases of child marriages and uses its best efforts to retain the girls at school even after the marriage, through conversations with their new families. Similar activities are held in the Tsenevi neighbourhood in the town of Dupnitsa by the local “Amala” Association led by the Roma leader Mrs. Julia Lyubenova. Employees of the association work on daily basis with the young people and know closely each individual case. This enables them to react promptly when they realize that an underage student is likely to get married and to start regular meetings in order to convince them to continue their education and postpone the marriage. Since the summer holiday is a high-risk period, the association organizes lectures and projections of the “Amalipe” documentary film among the Roma youth.

The activities of grassroots organizations working on desegregation initiatives in education also indirectly influence the reduction of child marriages through their contribution to the rise in the educational status of young girls and their familiarization with different models of behavior. For example, many of the girls involved in the desegregation activities during their primary education choose to continue their secondary education, which, as indicated by the parents, is due to the key influence of the local Roma organization (Resource Center Sham – Montana, located in Kosharnik district, Naangle 2001 Foundation in Rakovitsa District of the town of Berkovitsa, Romani Baht Foundation in Fakulteta neighbourhood of Sofia city). Such activities can be identified as key factors for contributing to a rise in the educational status of Roma girls and, respectively, a higher average age for marriage. The activities are held by community organizations which operate according to the specific situation in the settlement, the neighborhood and even according to the individual case of each girl who has entered into an early marriage or is threatened by such a possibility.

4.5. The problem with child marriages and Romani girls’ education in Europe

39 A story about two school friends with different life-paths – one gets married early while the other gets educated and becomes a doctor..

In Romania, child marriage is a topic of a number of reports,⁴⁰ including some commissioned by UNICEF.⁴¹ The issue went public and even international after widespread media coverage of the case of Anna-Maria Cioaba, daughter of Florin Cioaba, known as the Roma King: in 2003, at the age of 12, she entered into an arranged marriage with a 15-year-old boy, as is the Kalderari Roma's custom. The curious thing is the community's attempt to "solve" the problem a decade later, in 2014. In his capacity as a Roma leader, the son of the late Florin Cioaba declared that the Stabor – the high authority for making decisions and solving problems, consisting of men respected by the community – decided that "our girls should first go to school and then get married", since everyone "is entering a new, modern world; it is high time that we changed too, so we have decided that Roma marriage shall not bind people under the age of 16", which is still happening".⁴²

Some practices and initiatives suggested in 2010 by a forum of activists and specialists are related mainly to work inside Roma communities and on a family level – paying visits in Roma houses, providing educational services at home, creating schools for married couples and working with the parents who basically take the decision for their children's marriage.⁴³ The review of existing practices shows that, similar to the situation in Bulgaria, the primary focus is on sanctioning the presentation of child marriage as a fundamental Roma tradition.

In Serbia, a decade or so ago, the same issue was raised in the discussions about Roma women's rights and a debate on virginity as a core social value and a distinct marker of identity among Romani communities.⁴⁴ It is curious to point out that the reports were prepared by insiders – Romani women from the region, who conducted in-depth research in local Roma communities and provided an interesting picture of cohabitation or conflict between different behavioral patterns of Romani girls in some more conservative and in their own personal views on the possibility for individual self-realization. In recent years, the problem has been discussed in reports by UNICEF and by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

At the European level, the problem of child marriages has until recently been regarded as part of the protection of Roma women's rights in Europe,⁴⁵ or in terms of considering the situation of Romani women and girls. In particular, the issue of child marriage gets directly addressed by the Roma and Travellers Forum at the Council of Europe (European RTF) which, in 2014, jointly with the Phenjalipe (sisterhood) Platform of Roma women, issued a report on Making Early Marriages in Roma Communities a Global Concern. The report offers a review of earlier documentation (reports and researches) and gives recommendations aimed at solving the problem of dropping out of school in relation with child marriages. A few important tips should be highlighted which relate to the support of Romani communities: information campaigns among parents about the effects of child marriage and early maternity; incorporation of the issue of Roma girls' education in strategic plans and programs at central and local levels; creating and raising funds specifically for improving Roma girls's education

40 Oprea, A. 2005. Children's Marriage: a cultural, access to education or racial problem? Deconstructing a dimension in understanding the oppression of the Roma - ERRC newsletter 2; Surdu, M. 2004. Sarcina și căsătoria timpurie în rândul tinerelor roma [Teen Pregnancy and Early Marriage Among Young Roma Girls]. CEDU 2000+; Voicu, M. and R. Popescu. 2006. Early marriage and pregnancy in Roma communities, Education 2000+ Publishing, Bucharest..

41 Bițu, N., Morteau, C. 2010. Are the rights of the child negotiable? The Case of Early Marriages among Roma Communities in Romania, Bucharest: UNICEF and Romani C.R.I.S.S.

42 Marian Chiriac: Gypsy King Bans Child Marriages, "Community ,king' says he and clan elders have agreed that the tradition of Roma marrying under the age of 16 must go - and those defying the ruling will face exclusion." 26 March, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/romania-s-roma-to-drop-early-marriage-tradition>

43 Bițu, N., Morteau, C, op. cit, p. 120.

44 Mitro, V. and M. Aleksandrović. 2003. Virgin, yes or not? Novi Sad: AB print publikacije.

45 The Council of Europe Report, Situation of Roma/Gypsy women in Europe, p. 10, roma\mgsrom\doc99\MG-S-ROM (99) 9 by Nicoleta Bitu; European Roma Rights Centre and European Roma Information Office, The situation of Roma in an enlarged European Union, report for the European Commission, 2004, recommendation 78.

through programs, grants, etc.; stimulating the creation of networks of young people, especially Roma girls, who could commit themselves to social work in their communities.

According to the experts interviewed in the Balkans or other European countries, the problem of early marriages exists among other Roma communities as well. As most effective are identified the activities of various social organizations, leaders and celebrities in the community who work on a daily basis with children and families of the community and contribute to a rise in the education status and the reduction in the number of child marriages. As “working” projects, there are extracurricular activities for children associated with Roma culture and identity, building role models via the assistance of successful Romani girls in the community, building economic opportunities for families and women from the community who possess a higher level of education.

5. SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS OF THE ROMANI COMMUNITIES IN THE THREE REGIONS

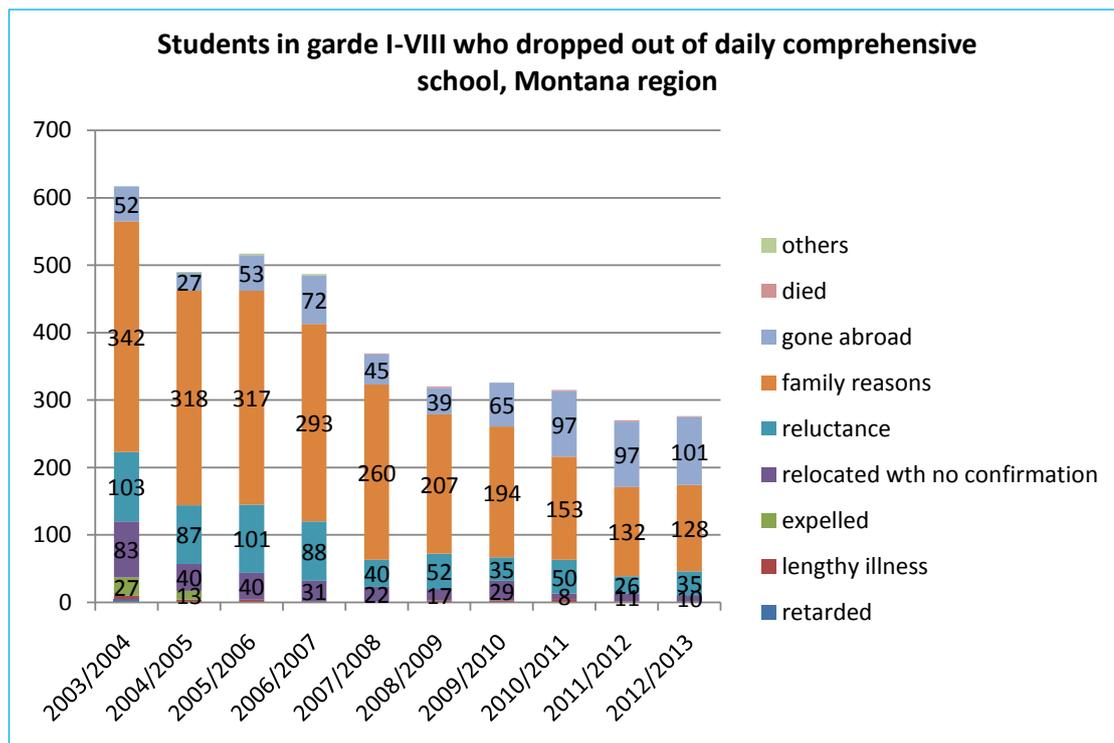
5.1. Attitudes and practices of Romani communities in Montana region

The survey was conducted among the communities in three places of residence in the region – the



towns of Montana and Berkovitsa, and the village of Dolni Tsibar. As shown in the data from the national statistics and UNICEF expert reports,⁴⁶ for some municipalities where Roma communities live, child marriage is a practice in some neighborhoods and is one of the reasons for dropout from the education system. The reasons for more than half of the dropouts in the last two years are family reasons and reluctance. Child marriages often stand behind these categories.

⁴⁶ Grekova, M. 2011. Summary of the results of a study on risk communities from the municipalities of Shumen region. Sofia: Health problems of minorities (unpublished report, UNICEF); Sechkova, R. 2014. Results from the field research of Roma communities in Montana municipality with a focus on children and their families. Final Report (unpublished report, UNICEF).



Source: NSI

in cohabitation has halved - in 2001 there were 61, and in 2011 28 girls were in cohabitation. At the same time the proportion of those who graduated secondary education has been increasing (15 girls in 2001 and 9 girls in 2011). In the municipality of Valchedram alone the number of girls in cohabitation under 16 years of age was 7 in 2011; 5 in the municipality of Montana and 4 in the municipality of Varshets. Only three girls were declared in the municipality of Berkovitsa. It can be assumed, however, that some of the families where an underage married girl lived chose not to declare the cohabitation. A significant decrease is observed in regard to the number of minor girls in cohabitation - from 235 girls in 2001 to 145 girls in 2011. In 2011 their number was the highest in the municipalities of Montana (28), Lom (28), and Berkovitsa (23), while in the municipalities of Varshets and Valchedram 20 girls aged under 18 were living in cohabitation.

Despite the significant decrease over the last ten years, the number of the minor mothers is relatively high. In 2011, 85 underage mothers gave birth to their first child, 22 gave birth to a second and 2 to a third child. In 2012, these figures were 87 girls who gave birth to a first child, 12 to a second, and 2 to a third child. In 2013, 75 underage girls became mothers for the first time, while 9 gave birth to a second child. Again, the largest number of these mothers was in the municipalities of Lom (20) Berkovitsa (15) and Montana (15).

Source: NSI

in the Ogosta District, near the city center, and some families that had moved to the remote Kosharnik District, where *Reshetari* (sieve makers), *Koshnichari* (basket makers), and *Tsutsumani* also live. The last group prefers to declare Bulgarian identity and marry relatively late.

Among the *Kalajdzhii* of the Northwest Bulgaria, secondary education became mainstream soon after the 1960s. Young girls and boys from this group in Montana are very ambitious and have clear ideas about what they want to achieve. They aim to complete secondary education as a minimum and pursue practical realization (specialties as cosmetics, textiles, etc.). Currently there are 40 university students from this group in Montana. The average marriage age is over 20 years. The bride honor requirement is not practiced, but remains a remembered norm (“This rule is no longer respected among us”), while the groups of *Reshetari* still maintain it), and sexual intercourse before marriage is acceptable among the *Kalajdzhiji* in Montana.

The *Koshnichari* and *Reshetari* boys aim to complete primary education as a minimum, since it is a requirement for driving license acquisition. The girls from the same groups do not have clear idea about which grade is sufficient to study, but they generally believe it is better to have at least the primary education in order to have the opportunity to work. In these groups there is no serious parental concern for education in the city center. The problems are mainly the lack of resources, lower educational status of families, extreme poverty, and poor living conditions in which live part of *Reshetari* and *Koshnichari*, as well as lack of motivation to acquire a degree beyond primary education. This may cause children to drop out because they are usually compelled to begin work with the family, help at home, and some girls get married. Boys and girls from (*Reshetari* and *Koshnichari*) families living among *Kalajdzhii* in the center of Kosharnik District are more likely to complete secondary education.

There is an increase in the marriage age among *Reshetari* and *Koshnichari*. The informants put the age after 16 years as appropriate for marriage, however, getting married before 16 is also possible. The desegregational activities of the Sham Foundation (encompassing youth of these groups over the last 15 years) has also made a positive impact on the personal choice to continue education in secondary schools. Both children and parents are discouraged by the lack of employment opportunities. Some uneducated parents might argue: “His grandpa did not study, his father did not study, so why he is the one to study.”

The personal choice of the youngsters is the main factor when taking decision for marriage, while parental approval is not mandatory. First, the girl is asked to become a wife, and if her parents disagree “we take the girl at our place, and her parents come, if they want to. Then we do the wedding.” The bride elopement practice is deemed a faded-away phenomenon. Currently the dominant model in the early cohabitations is the girl to go voluntarily to the boy’s place. Girls who get married under the age of 18 and their spouses confirmed that the girl’s parents disagreed about the marriage, but were faced with a *fait accompli*. According to the *Kalajdzhii*, education of the girl is very important, along with her personal qualities, while for the other two groups the level of education does not matter. If for some reason a *Kalajdzhii* girl gets married before completing her secondary education, she must complete it, even after marriage.

According to Roma experts in the town of Montana child marriages are practiced mostly in poor families. Experts stressed on the necessity for activities supporting the children’s education – for example, a more active attitude on behalf of the schools, interactive and sport activities to attract children, continual work with families, following the example of the long-term work of the Sham Foundation as a result of which model of studying in the town schools is already established and the

educational level of the community is higher.

In **Rakovitsa district, town of Berkovitsa**, live two Roma groups: the formerly nomadic *Koshnichari* who settled in 1950s and *Muhchii* who had settled earlier. It is commonly accepted in the neighbourhood that girls get married before they finish eighth grade. *Muhchii* tend to express a negative attitude towards child marriage emphasizing the need for a diploma to get a job, while *Koshnichari* consider child marriages as part of their tradition. Both groups practice, however, them and intermarriage among them is common. The typical cases are two. The mother or grandmother of the boy identify a girl for a marital partner and seek the agreement of her family. In case of refusal, the girl escapes with the boy. The second typical case is when the girl and the boy have a 'serious relationship', e.g. they date each other with the consent of their parents, go to a coffee shop, until the moment when the boy's family come to ask for the girl. This usually happens quickly after the girl and the boy start to date, as doubts about the virginity of the girl may appear otherwise. A third option is when the boy and girl love each other, but the boy's parents do not accept the girl for a bride. Then the boy's parents quickly arrange a marriage with another girl in order to avoid "making a mistake with the girl" he meets. Usually the boy obeys his parents.

A girl aged between 14 and 16 is considered the ideal marriage partner. Girls over 16 are "old already", while 18-year-olds are the ones that "nobody wants": "She is too old"; "Ah, who would marry her?"; "She's probably not a virgin", etc. According to the unmarried boys, "half the girls graduate eighth grade, but the other do not even reach that grade" because it does not matter to them, as they are requested to be good housemaids and help in the family business. Young people are completely economically dependent on their parents and participate in the family business (mainly trade). The common opinion is that the girls do not need a driving license and therefore there is no need to graduate eighth grade.

Women past their 30s most often explain their marriage in the following manner: "My mother got me married; I did not want to." This generation expresses the opinion that their sons and daughters should "live their own lives" and marry at a more mature age, but the mothers-in-law impose and usually take in their own hand decisions on marriage of grandchildren and granddaughters.

We, the young people, want this to change, while the elderly people [mothers in-law, grandmothers] fill their heads with things like "Come on, let's get you married"; "Come on, let's take this girl for bride", so the young people get influenced by this kind of talk. Therefore, if there is such a law and to marry young is not allowed, and it is said that it is compulsory to study by a certain age, as for example 18 years, then child marriages would stop. If someone violates [the rule] there should be sanctions. If there is a punishment, there would be a reduction of marriages at 13-14 years.

(35 year old woman, *Koshnichari*)

Because it is [inherited] from the elders, from the grandparents, but this is not good; we, the young people of our age don't approve and don't want it, that's how it started and the youngsters do it. There are girls who get married, although they want to study. In our neighborhood it is important to do what the fathers and mothers say, the grandmothers arrange the marriages: "My girl you will go at this place, people there are good ... "

((35 year old woman, *Koshnichari*)

Pre-marital relations in the form of going out for a coffee are acceptable, but the parents express

tremendous distrust in their children and fear that the family honor could be damaged. That is why they think that if a girl starts wearing makeup and dating a boy, she must get married faster:

As soon as the girl dates someone, they immediately begin to doubt that she is not a virgin. Because as she reached the age 17-18, she will need to sleep with a man.

(woman, *Muhchii*)

For us in the first place is the virginity, this is the most important. If she is 20, she could not be a virgin. If she goes somewhere [sleeps with someone] then I'll chop her and give her to the dogs.

(65-year-old woman, *Koshnichari*)

My daughter studies hard and wants to study after eighth grade, but I do not think that I will let her, as there is lots of fucking going on out there in the city, I'm sorry to say it, but I say it as a mother. Let her complete the eighth grade, then whatever the Lord gives. Let her graduate eighth class, but then no more [studying] ... she is a female offspring. Now I send her to school, but how could I know what she is doing in school, she could go to the bars.

(38 year old woman, *Koshnichari*)

If a girl wishes to study and not date boys, she would never be stopped by her parents to continue education. However, girls who study in high school are very few and “can be counted on your fingers“.

According to Roma activists with experience in the field of education what is needed is long-term work with the families to motivate them to attempt for a higher educational status of their children by providing better conditions and educational access. A big issue is the parents' desire to enrol them in the local “Gypsy school” as they would like to know what the girl does. Further discouragement comes from the negative attitude of the Bulgarian children to Roma. As a result, several girls in the upper grades were moved from mainstream schools to the neighborhood Roma-only school “after incidents” with Bulgarian students. There is no bus provided for children who wish to attend schools in the town's center, which is 4 km away.

The women of the middle generation express a view for a change of the child marriage practice. They believe that children are too young and inexperienced for such a step, and recommend campaigns to publicize the child protection legislation and the sanctions provided for child marriages. They also suggest that the imposing of effective sentences would serve as a sort of prevention. However, many of the elderly women consider early marriage as a norm, mainly for the fear of lack of control over children and early sexual intercourse.

The child marriages are not typical for the *Kalajdzhii* in the village of **Dolni Tsibar** (there was only one such case in recent years - a 17-year-old girl gave birth). Secondary school education is the lowest educational level to be acquired by the *Kalajdzhii* youngsters in nearby towns. The trend to enroll for university education is mainstream among the youngsters. If someone decides not to enroll at university, it is because of the lack of funds or lack of motivation, since many university graduates are unemployed. A practice in some families is to support first the university graduation of one child, until the other child waits for the graduation of the former, in order to enroll at university. The primary school in the village is run by a Roma director and a highly motivated team (including 12 Roma teachers). Despite the scarce resources and school base, it develops extracurricular activities and is open over the weekends. The educational trend within the group started from the first half of the XX

c. - when “our grandparents, even our grandmothers, went to school in the neighboring village and completed the highest possible grade “. Then, in the middle of the XX c. already appeared the first walkers (as of the opt definition of Yosif Nunev) in the village who stand up as role models for the rest - Asim Nalbantov who worked in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Colonel Monchev, Colonel Fencho (Feni) Burgazov, certified engineer Sergej Chirkov Genchev.

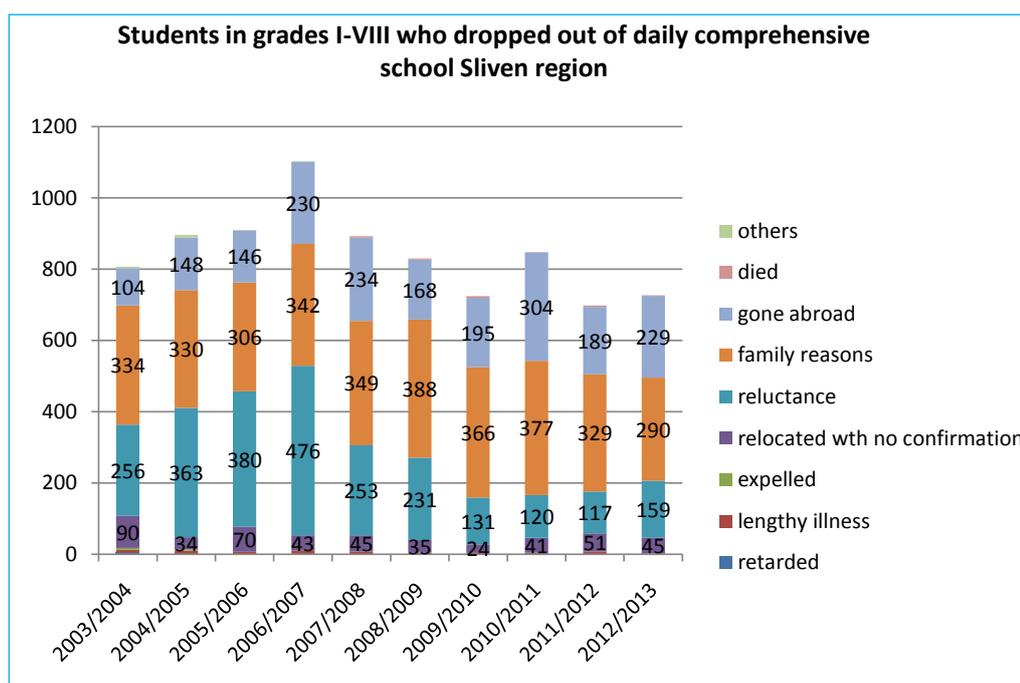
A long time ago all children in the family were told ,choose the mattock or the pen’, they were purposefully driven to study. We choose pens, but the personal example has played a big role. In every family there was someone educated, who was given an example.

(female, 38 years)

In the 1970s girls enrolled for secondary education only in nearby towns, due to the parental concerns about studying in remote places. The enrollment at universities became mainstream at the end of the 1980s and especially after the 1990s. So today it is a common practice. The *Kalajdzii* say they have followed the Bulgarian patterns for marriage and premarital intercourse. The girl’s virginity-requirement had faded away and the relations between youngsters are now largely unrestricted. The problems encountered by the girls in the village are related to the lack of funds for continuation of higher education and the lack of professional realization after graduation.

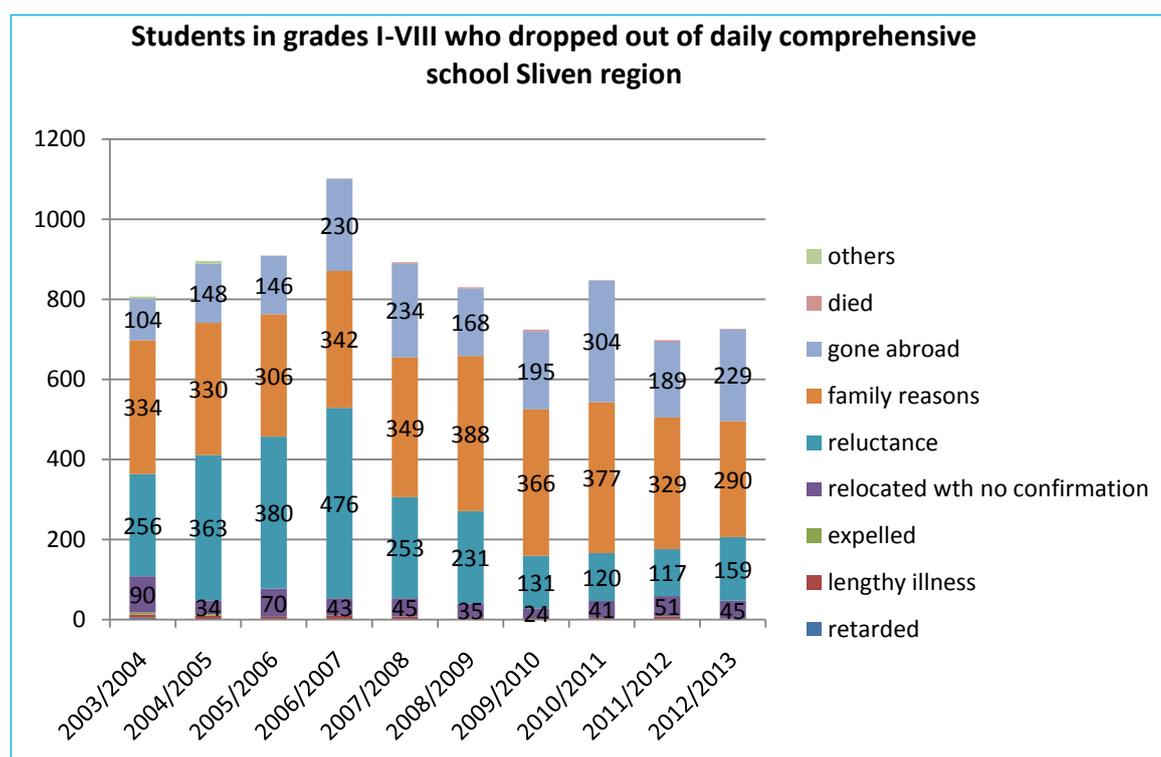
5.2. Attitudes and practices of Romani communities in the region of Sliven

The rate of school dropouts among children in the region of Sliven is high, since the largest number of students there stop school due to family reasons or reluctance to attend classes. As per the statistical data of a research conducted in Nadezhda District of Sliven and District Six of Nova Zagora, most parents encourage their sons to complete eighth grade in order to be able to sit the exam for a driver’s license, yet no such requirement is imposed on the girls. Only the most ambitious and courageous parents decide their daughters should finish eighth grade. Child marriages among girls are a norm, rather than an exception.



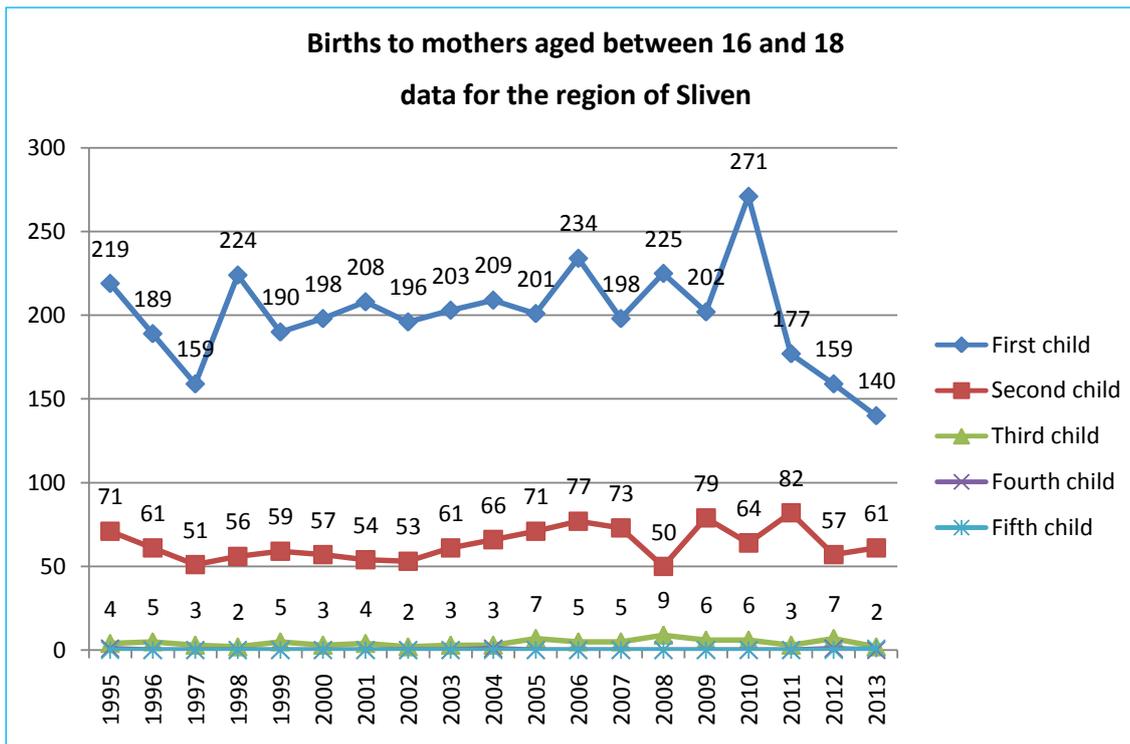
the number of girls who

give birth before the age of 16 and 18. However, cohabitation among youngsters before the age of 16 decreased from 242 cases in 2001 to 148 cases in 2011. At the same time, a certain rise in cases of cohabitation where the children have completed primary education can be observed (22 cohabiting girls finished primary school in 2001, and 28 in 2011). Over 85% of the girls who live in cohabitation before the age of 16 are located in the municipalities of Sliven and Nova Zagora. A similar tendency is observed among 18-year-olds cohabiting with a partner: their number decreased from 690 in 2001 to 498 in 2011, and again the highest concentration of such cases is in the municipalities of Sliven and Nova Zagora.



Source: NSI

In 2011, 259 girls delivered their first-born and 90 their second baby before reaching the age of 18. Respectively, 111 first-time and 8 second-time mothers had not reached the age of 16. In the same period, 5 underage girls delivered their third child, two of them younger than 16 years of age. In 2012, 273 under-age mothers had their first-born and 65 – their second child, of whom 114 and 8, respectively, are cases of childbirth before the age of 16. In 2013, there were 259 first-time and 68 second-time mothers of whom 119 and 7 were under the age of 16. More than half of the child marriages and early childbirth cases are registered in the municipality of Sliven: 161 minor mothers in 2011, 143 in 2012, 141 in 2013, all of them below the age of 18. The second largest group of underage mothers is registered in the municipality of Nova Zagora: 74 cases in 2011, 70 in 2012, and 76 in 2013. Although the rate of early childbirth cases in the region seems to decrease as a whole, the proportion of girls who gave birth before their sixteenth year increases as an absolute number and as a proportion from all births.



is inhabited by the so-called *Baychari*, while in the lower one, Nadezhda district, reside four main groups – *Turks, Musicians, Goli Tsigani* and *Gradeshki Gypsies* (coming from the village of Gradets). Komluka is an old neighborhood, with a high level of social integration of Roma who were part of the working proletariat in the textile factories of the city. As a result of various policies throughout the 20th century, especially in the second half of that century, the education became common and a great number of activists and university-graduates could be seen in the neighborhood.

Over the past 25 years, however, some negative events took place, associated mainly with mass-unemployment and all the general macrosociety problems that affect the Roma youth in the neighborhood (devaluation of education, risk of drugs, early sex life). Therefore, despite having abandoned the norm for the girl's virginity upon admission, and even with the elders' tacit agreement or ignorance regarding sexual intercourse before the wedding, the girls' average marriage age and level of education does not change. Most of the 50/60-year-old women share: "We used to elope and get married at the age of 15. Today there is no change." Parents generally encourage their children to complete school, yet they also point out that the level of education has become very low, as children are illiterate after primary school. All parents of early-wedded girls indicate they never wanted to marry their daughters, but had no other choice, since the future bride had lost her honour.

A family with two daughters, one of whom got married during her seventh grade, share:

The father: *We did not give our principle consent about that one, she fled, we looked for her, they went to Karandila, we drove around by taxi one day... We knew who the boy was, we went to his place. Not that we authorized it, we heard she was hanging out with the boy. When they came back we married her. She had arrived home spoiled already, you know...*

The mother: *What could we do? ... The other one we try to guard and protect now, so she doesn't end up like her older sister.*

A similar story happened to another girl who had a boyfriend and got pregnant at the age of 16 –

her parents even insisted on an abortion, so that she could continue her education afterwards. She, however, decided to get married instead: “Because I had no desire to go to school, and we really we loved each other anyway.”

Both single and married girls indicate that their parents want them to study: “In most cases it’s like that”, but despite this they prefer to get married. People in the neighborhood are surprised that recent marriages tend to be underage, with 14-year-old or 17-year-old girls, most of whom are actually pregnant:

Now, it’s as if the custom has returned, they all have liberty in their relationships and get pregnant...

(34-year-old woman)

Many of our classmates are already married and expecting a baby. They studied until grade 9 or 10. Recently, this can often be seen in the neighborhood. Not long ago, those who are older than us were delighted they would not have to marry so early, but last year they started to do the opposite: they get a boyfriend, drop out of school, and get married. Their parents agree ... Out of fear, it seems, for they say the girls will at least stay at home that way. You know, in our neighborhood no-one likes to comment a lot on what their children do. They try to protect our self-esteem and that’s why they prefer that the girls get married.

(17-year-old girls, Komluka)

Schoolgirls who join secondary or technical schools consider themselves an exception and often suffer the ridicule of their peers in the neighborhood: they tell us “You pretend to be Bulgarians now or what?“, “You seem to study a lot“, and they don’t think that is normal, they look upon us as if we are overdoing it somehow.

Both boys and girls confirm that this is already considered a tradition, as parents normally agree to marry their children, even if the latter may wish to continue studying.

According to the single boys who go to school, “the Roma worry too much about what people might say“, so parents decide to marry their children and avoid being condemned by the public opinion. Promiscuous contacts in the neighborhood are defined as the result of a lack of values and also as a consequence due to contacts with Bulgarians:

It comes from our Bulgarian peers – not that I wish to blame them. Bulgarian girls sleep with whomever they want and then get married. Now our girls start copying that and get married only if they get pregnant or caught. There are many who have been caught.

(17 year-old boy)

Boys over the age of 16 tend to be criticized by the elders for not being married yet and available girls are often brought to their attention. In fact, all of the young people who continue their education are actually believers who regularly attend the “Antioch” Evangelical church. This fact and especially the sermons of pastor Encho Hristov seem to have persuaded them to study:

The church influenced my desire to study more. To be honest, I did not like to attend classes in general, until grade 9 I often ran away, I was taking marijuana, too, and other drugs later, such as pico... But I changed my mind and decided it was good to study, so I became a regular in

class and moved to the textile school; it was very nice.

(18-year-old boy)

AHad it not been for the church, I would probably be like them [the girls in the neighborhood] and get married at 16.

(17-year-old girl)

Health mediators who work in “Komluka” believe that sanctions imposed on early marriages would have no effect at all, since the local police refuse to alert the prosecution; for the authorities “these are family affairs“. On the other hand, the community also believe that such measures will not have a preventive value, since all parents most readily take on a preventive role, but if their daughter gets pregnant, the only possible solution would be to marry the girl.

The average age at marriage in Nadezhda District is even lower. The most uneducated are the girls of the so-called *Turks* – the most numerous and affluent part of the neighborhood. There are frequent cases of young women over their 20s who used to attend school just till the end of their first primary grades. The age of 13 or 14 is deemed appropriate for a girl’s marriage, since at 15 she is already considered old, and if she gets 18 or 19 she has no chance to get married at all. According to many, the main reason for that is the requirement for the girl’s honour and the doubtful virginity of girls who are in their late adolescence:

1Those who are 18 or 19 years old are excluded from the options for marriage. It is assumed they are no longer virgins. Our people mainly seek the girl’s chastity and need to see that chastity, as it is the dignity of the family. All we strive to do is get a house and get married – that is all, we do not struggle for greater things in life.

(a family of *Turks*)

In the *Musicians* group the situation is similar, again for the same reasons – most parents accept their girl to get married to her boyfriend, since the whole neighborhood knows she is in a relationship and her reputation and virginity are already doubtful:

Such is the nature of our nation [community]. Whether you wish to keep your child or not, the very nation forces you to act in the accepted way... They [the parents] may go to the police, but once the word has been spread in the neighborhood, there is no turning back. My husband had not even touched me, I could be brought back home, but once the rumor is out in the neighborhood, there is no other way. Honour – that is what they insist on.

(a young woman, *Musicians*)

Among the group of *Goli Tsigani* who live in the hardest and poorest conditions, the same practice can be observed:

I do not see how we can go ahead, in a way we don’t give the girls any opportunity to be career-makers. Just imagine if I enroll my daughter in the textile secondary school right now – our nation [community] immediately starts a rumor – she is a spinster, nobody wants her – and that kind of prejudice can ruin the honor of my entire family. Maybe this is what makes us comply

with the public opinion, which for me personally is incorrect, yet we have to, because we live together.

(Goli tsigani, a 40-year-old man)

The three groups show minimal participation of the youngsters in the decision for marriage. Usually, the parents select a wedding partner, with the boy's mother playing a key role. On the other hand, it is the girl's mother who can make things happen, since she is the one responsible for protecting the girl's honour:

Some girls are deliberately given away. If a girl hangs out late, at 9 or 10 pm, her mother tries to get her married, convinced that she is only doing her good, yet that is not so. Our women, they make this all happen. The men disagree, because we want the girls to study. I, particularly, wanted my daughter to study, but something happened, you know, and I could no longer let her go to school... For my son, however, I insist that he finishes school.

(Turks, a 40-year-old man)

Some of the boys in the three groups continue their secondary education, while many of the girls drop out before they even finish eighth grade. Younger parents try to encourage their daughters to study "at least" until eighth grade. The community can be motivated to educate the young girls more, using the argument that basic education is a requirement for finding a job in any of the local light-industry enterprises, and lack of education has become a serious problem for women from the neighborhood who currently go to work in such enterprises. The *Musicians* are generally the most socially and geographically mobile group, so all negative trends associated with life in such an environment get compensated by means of the families' life in migration – inside the country or abroad. As a result, among them there are indications for a possible rise of the marital age in the close future. All young parents are convinced that children need to study, yet the horizon seen as a maximum for their daughter is "to complete her eighth grade at least." Those living outside the neighborhood, however, seem to have plans for the girls' secondary education.

The impact of the Evangelical church is observed among the residents of the neighborhood – churches contribute for the community's development via a number of social and educational activities. With their intermediation, campaigns could be run for reaching a higher educational status of the girls.

Men and younger women (20-35 years old) already tend to believe that girls should study longer, complete their education and get married at an older age, yet at the same time early marriage is perceived as imposed by the very community. Among most men, as well as most activists, there is an opinion that lawsuits should be filed in the case of an early marriage, "so that it is brought up as a rumor", which eventually will lead to a rise of the marital age. Other suggested measures refer to active community work with the older and younger men and women in the form of drama, role play and other methods which attempt to make them understand that girls are still children and, allegedly, physically and mentally immature to have a family of their own.

In the **town of Nova Zagora** there is a homogeneous group of Turkish identity – inhabitants of District Six and other parts such as the Madzhurova neighborhood. In the peripheral, lower part of the neighborhood, the conditions for life seem to be extremely poor and there are children who are not even registered in the educational system at all. Girls are usually stopped from going to school during

fifth or sixth grade, as “they might get stolen” – in the words of their parents, although there have been no such cases of bride-stealing for the past 20 years. Only 10 girls are attending eighth grade at the local school, since the rest got suspended by their parents. The girls who study consider themselves different, since their parents support their decision, explaining that it is important to study today.

My granddaughter is in seventh grade, she is very pretty, so we let her go to school with great fear, as they already began asking for her in marriage. Her mother and father do not give her away, the father says – no, I have decided she will study till eighth grade, so no one can take her now.

(a 52-year-old woman)

Girls who drop out of school stay home with their mothers and get engaged in housework, preparing themselves for their life as future wives. Their grandmothers explain: *How can we let her go, a blue-eyed beauty, better stay by her mother ... now she does not study.*

The neighborhood in Nova Zagora is actually the only place where the educational level is lower, if compared with the opposite tendency in all other sites visited. Women over the age of 50 have completed tenth grade and then got employed, so the model of the educated woman is not strange for them. Socioeconomic processes in the recent years have led to the community’s isolation from the macro-society and its encapsulation. Education is not seen as a resource that may help the girls find a job, since unemployment reigns in the country and the only possible realization for families from the neighborhood is labor migration and becoming part of the cheap labor force somewhere in Greece, Italy, or France:

So many boys complete eighth grade, smart boys, but no one has been able to continue to study. They go to work in Greece, as for four years there they can earn for a good life. My son finished his twelfth grade and went to France. We have many who completed secondary education, yet cannot find work, only the boys can have a job in the family. We [in the community] have 3 girls who completed secondary education. Who wouldn’t like their kid to study, but now there is no work.

(a 50-year-old woman)

We got married in 1989-1990. I’m not the one who chose my woman. My mother selected her. I studied till my twelfth grade, I have two diplomas, a secondary special, but that’s useless. With or without education, it’s all the same, education means nothing. You need it in principal...

(a 40-year-old man)

Two of the girls who are secondary school graduates do not live in the neighborhood, but among Bulgarians, in the town, and the third girl is the first and only university graduate in the neighborhood. With the boys the situation is different – even after an early marriage they can still continue to study till grade eight or twelve and completion of secondary education or high school is quite common for them, mostly due to their parents’ desire. The boys confirm that who their future bride will be depends on their parents’ choice and they are ready to accept it.

According to the girls, the best thing that can happen to them is to get married. Usually the boy’s grandmother likes a particular girl for a future bride and makes arrangements with her parents. It is possible for the young people neither to know, nor to have seen each other. According to the

grandmothers, however, “now the young tend to make love” and should be wedded even earlier. After the engagement, the grandmothers and mothers of the boy begin to take care of and train their daughters-in-law. The earliest marriageable age for a girl is 10-11 years, yet she is taken care of as another child in the family till the age of 13, when she is allowed to have sexual intercourse with her husband.

Some of the men in the neighborhood who make decisions for their daughters and granddaughters, say that the practice of child marriage is wrong and must be stopped, but “women hold on to it“:

I have a granddaughter who is 10 years old, she is very beautiful. Her grandmother (on the side of my daughter-in-law) says – oohh, another 2-3 years and we shall get her married. I do not want that, so I shall get her out of here, I'll send her to France, she only needs to avoid any problems and study there...

(a 55-year-old man)

Men also voice the opinion that this practice should be punished, and they are convinced that sanctions can lead to a significant reduction of such cases. Institutional interference in the neighborhood in connection with child marriages is not mentioned, with the exception of the trial of parents whose daughter was married at the age of 14 and gave birth at the age of 15.

In the **village of Gradets** there is a community defined as the *Darvari* - woodcutters, while other Roma call them *Gradeshki* (coming from Gradets) *Gypsies*. In the past, they were known for their low educational status – completion of primary education was rare among the youngsters. In the past 15 years the situation has changed: since the year 2000, several generations have completed the eighth grade in the village and a group of 10 have decided to go on studying, with 3 girls among them. This marks the beginning of a tendency for graduating a secondary school in Sliven, Kotel, Yambol or Haskovo, with the girls most often enrolling in Kotel, so that they can return home by evening. Basic education is now considered mandatory, due to the fact that it is required for getting a driver's license. However, many of the older people are quite skeptical about education or the opportunities it may offer, because the craft of timber-logging can secure an income far higher than the average monthly salary:

The reason for such a way of thinking is not because the parents simply have that idea, but due to the state of economy. What they can figure out is the following – OK, he will graduate school only to earn a monthly salary that I can earn in 4-5 days. And this is so, indeed, yet none of them [has a] regular [contract], since none of them has any social security.

(Kolyo Kolev, health mediator)

With regards to the girls' education, the attitude remains conservative. For those girls who 6-7 years ago were the first to complete their secondary education, it was very difficult because their parents “think mostly about what people will say” – if you're 18-20 and you have not married, people say “she is one of them, you know“. Now, there are a few examples set, so girls from the village who wish to study may follow them. But the professional realization remains a problem, since almost all secondary-school graduates (girls and boys) cannot find a job and join their parents' work in timber-logging. Just like in other villages, parents have certain reservations and concerns about letting their girl out of the neighborhood:

My kids will study till grade 8, and then, of course, I will not let them go out. I can see the way

things go now – they begin smoking, and not only that. If it was just for the learning, of course, I would let them learn, but ... Today, if you aren't educated, there is no sense in life. We deal with timber and we don't need any education for that, but in order to be able to put your signature, file a request or make an offer, you must be literate. If there was a high-school here, things would be easier, they would study more.

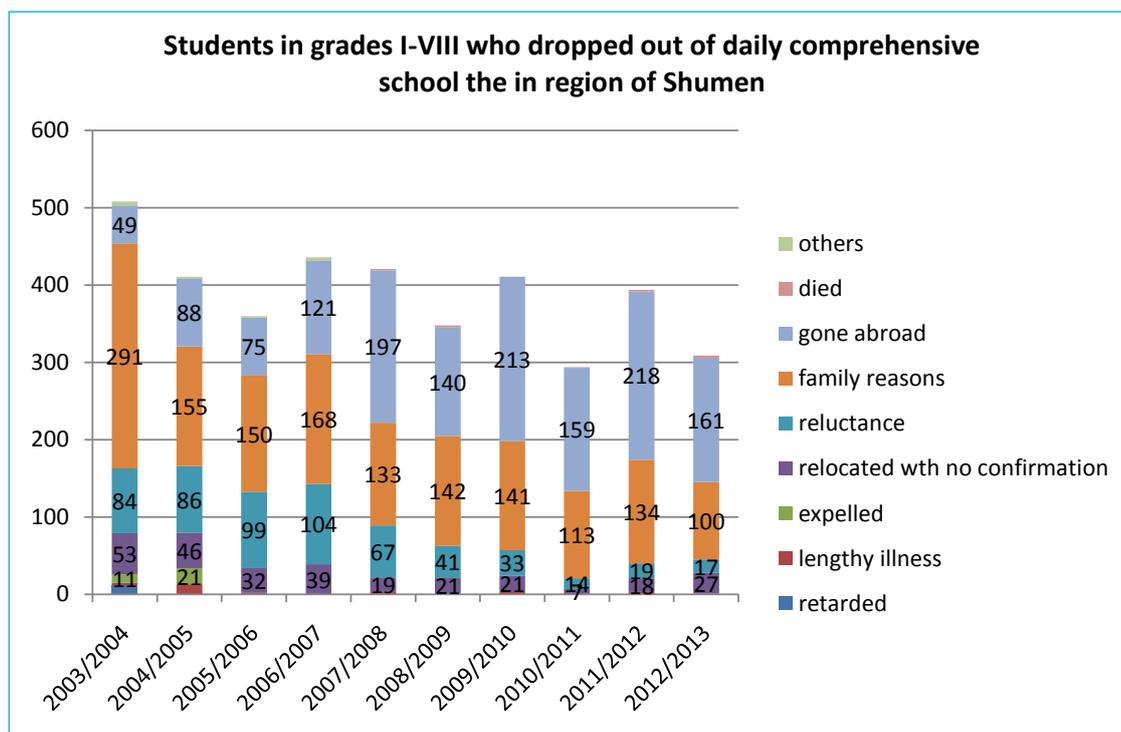
(a father of two girls)

The girls who live with their parents in the mixed environment of the big cities, wish to continue their education after the eighth grade and do not accept any marriage proposals made by families who have selected them as future brides. Even when a girl got “stolen” by a boy in Dobrich, she was quite firm in stating that she wanted to continue her education and, therefore, returned to her family. For the parents, their children’s choice of education and plans for marriage are leading.

5.3. Attitudes and practices of Romani communities in the region of Shumen

The study was carried out in the town of Shumen, the town of Novi Pazar, and the village of Zlatar, with several other meetings held with communities in the town of Veliki Preslav and the village of Salmanovo. In general, the opinion of those in local Roma communities and experts indicate that child marriages taken separately or as a reason for dropping out of school are not a problem, due to the dynamic changes in the communities over the past 15-20 years.

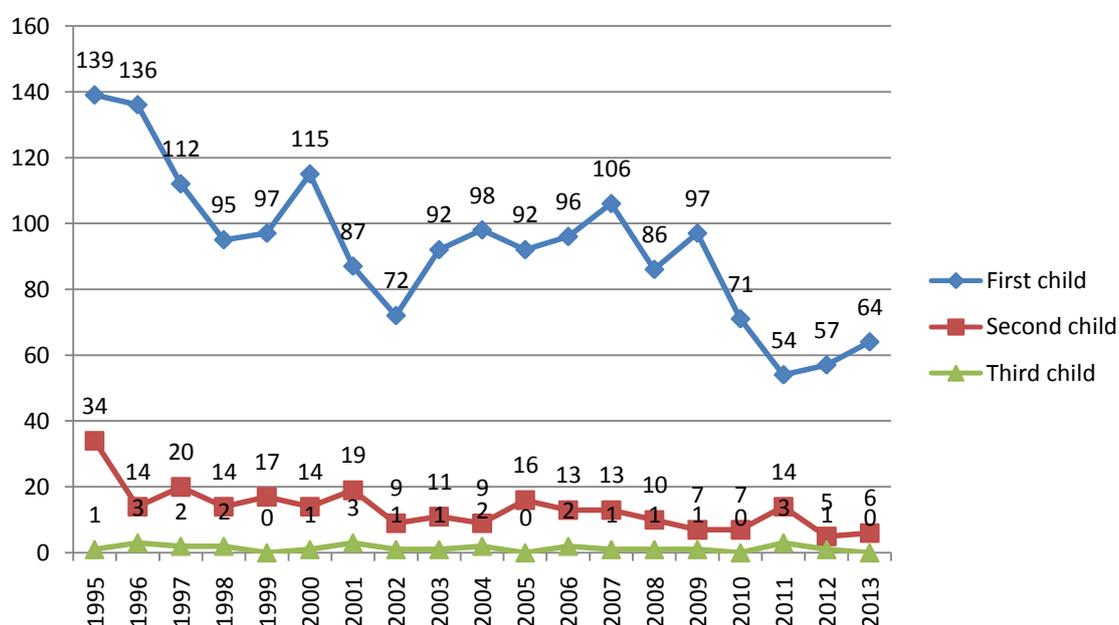
Labour migration is actually a mass process among the local communities which, on the one hand, affects every family in the region, and on the other, gets reflected in the attitude of all generations of the community. Education, for example, is regarded as a resource that is useful in migration. As per the the chart of school dropouts from first to eighth grades, for over 50% of the students the most common reason for leaving school in the recent years has been to go abroad, and 117 children in the whole region dropped out of school due to family reasons or unwillingness to attend classes.



Source: NSI

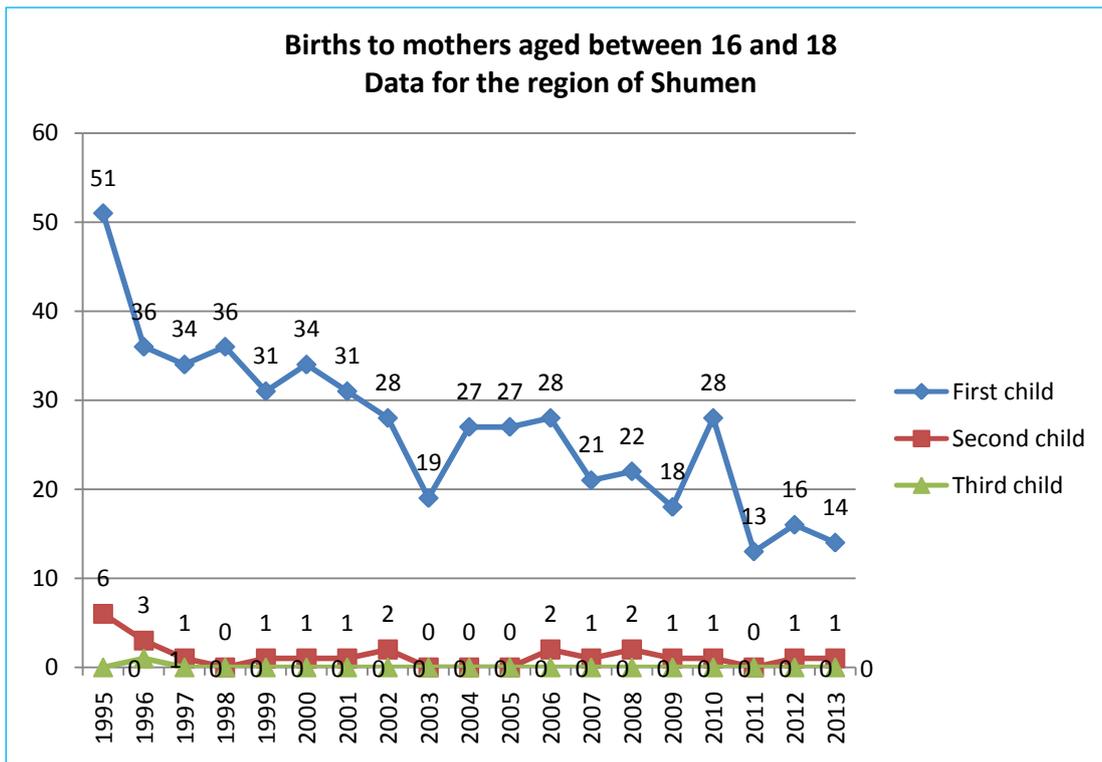
In the main city of the region, the marriageable age exceeds 18 years and families encourage their girls' completion of secondary education. For other places with a dense Roma population, the time after completing eighth grade and over the age of 16 is considered eligible for marriage. Data from the last two official censuses shows that the number of girls under the age of 18 in cohabitation in the area of the whole region decreased from 350 in 2001 to 181 in 2011. The number of births delivered by mothers under the age of 18, however, increased in the last three years – in 2011, 67 girls became mothers for the first time, 14 gave birth to their second child, and 3 had a third child; in 2012, 73 gave birth to a first child, 6 had their second, and 1 had a third child, and in 2013 the girls who gave birth before completing 18 are: 78 with a first child and 7 with a second child. The highest number of girls under 18 who gave birth is registered in the municipalities in Shumen (36, 20 of which with primary education) and Varbitsa (26, 10 of which with elementary and 16 with primary or lower education), followed by the municipalities of Kaolinovo (22), Novi Pazar (20), and Smiadovo (20).

**Births to mothers aged between 16 and 18
Data for the region of Shumen**



Source: NSI

Child marriages are not identified as a problem by local communities and the marriage of girls under the age of 16 is already considered completely unacceptable and characteristic only for “uncultured” and poorer families. This can explain the relatively low number of girls under 16 in cohabitation who have recently become mothers. In 2001, in the region of Shumen, 94 girls under the age of 16 are in cohabitation, while in 2011 that number is 39, and most cases are among the so-called *Turkish Gypsies* in the municipalities of Varbitsa (8), Kaolinovo (7), and Novi Pazar (5). In the municipality of Shumen there are just 6 cases (compared to 24 in 2001). In the last three years, the number of girls who became mothers before the age of 16 is also lower than that registered in other areas of the country – 13 (2011), 16 (2012) and 14 (2013).



Source: NSI

In the **city of Shumen** there are two Roma groups: the *Horahane/Gadzhikane Roma* (called *Turkish Gypsies* by the local population and *Laho* by the *Musicians*) and the *Musicians* (called *Katkadhii* by the other Roma). The *Byalata Prust District* and part of *Everest District* are populated only with *Turkish Gypsies* who also live in the *Vitosha district*, while the *Musicians* live in *Vitosha* and are also scattered in the city. In *Vitosha* there is a distinction between the Roma who live in houses and those who live in apartment blocks – the latter have a higher socioeconomic status. Mass migration of many families or family members in working age who moved to certain cities in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands has led to the depopulation of the neighborhoods.

In both groups, the two steps for entering into marriage are asking for the bride and/or bride elopement, which used to be a common practice in the past, with the school as one of the common places for stealing the girl. In both groups, the first wedding night occurs immediately after the asking or elopement, and there is a ritual of drinking sweet brandy, with which it is considered that “there is no way for her to go back, no one would want her, once the trouble has been done”. Nowadays in both groups this happens at a much later age than in the past – after 19 for the girls and after 22-24 for the boys, which is considered the normal marriageable age, while “before, they had to marry earlier and at 17 were already considered old maids”. It is acceptable and normal for a girl to go out with a boy upon the secured approval of their parents and plan a wedding after the completion of secondary education. According to all interviewed parents and grandparents, marriages under the age of 18 are undesirable. Decisions on a future spouse are taken by the young people themselves and intervention by the parents is minimal. For the parents, it is important that their child’s future spouse is from a good family within their own group, yet they do not impose any restrictions on the choice of their children. A most common case is that the young people notify their parents about the choice they have already made.

A dynamic process can be observed in combination with the standard norm for a good wife and the pursuit of better education:

The Roma woman is first a housewife, a mother and a wife, and then everything else. The last thing she should do is go to school. For a Roma bride it is very difficult to continue her studies, if she wants to. Taking into account her relatives, such as father-in-law, mother-in-law, all the customs ... Well, it's very hard, indeed. However, that shell is getting broken already, the young tend to complete high school, we have young Roma who are university graduates ... We see that today, without education, we can hardly find a job, even a cleaner is supposed to have primary education. The younger people are willing to study. It has become fashionable for kids to go on studying, so early marriages are gone – such cases can be counted on the fingers of a hand. The villages might be more likely to practice them, but it is no longer done here. Our place is full of girls and boys from the Deliorman. My impressions are that early marriages are gone for good.

(34-year-old woman years, Byalata Prust)

Parents want their children “to enjoy life, and not to become laundry maids or cleaners at the age of 16”; “to be educated, not like us”; “to take a diploma, so that they get a job, because even a cleaner needs primary education today”; “to study to the highest grade possible”, etc. Their motives are related to the evaluation of education as a social capital enabling the girls’ realization in Bulgaria and abroad: *we already wish for them to have good education and to study and go abroad* (30-year-old woman, Everest); *I am poor, I live in a hole, but I don’t want my children to live the same way* (40-year-old woman, Vitosha). These processes are very dynamic, the result of community development over the past 20 years. In the Vitosha district, the prom of the first *Horahane Roma* girl to complete her high school there was in 1997, after which she became the example for many girls from the neighborhood, and today, the prom is part of the family system of customs.

Child marriages are just single cases among the poorest and marginalized families: extreme poverty, combined with lack of education and prospects for development.⁴⁷ However, in the families with better standards of living, just like in poor ones, it is possible for such a marriage to occur, “if the trouble has been done”, i.e. if the girl elopes and/or goes to bed with the boy. Then the parents, even if they have disagreed at first, accept the marriage:

We did it and that was it – all done. My parents reacted very badly, they were angry, but I was pregnant.

(16-year-old girl, Byalata Prust)

My parents wanted me to study, they always told me and my brother that we should study, I ran away with my husband and they had nothing to do. I was 14 then.

(17-year-old girl, Vitosha)

The cases of early marriage are so rare that even the locals find it difficult to remember any such cases after 2002-2003, and if it happens, “the neighborhood feels ashamed”, “for us, now, it is shameful, it is not normal”.

At the same time, the rise of the marriageable age is not directly related to a rise of the educational status. Completion of eighth grade is considered to be the minimum requirement and completion of secondary school is a frequent but not common practice among girls. The younger and older generations claim that the decision to go on studying depends entirely on the personal choice of the girl,

⁴⁷ The last case is a very recent one. A girl from a poor family gets married – but a poorer boy at school likes her, so in order for him not to steal her, she runs away with another boy. Her uncle notified the police and the child protection authorities come, but the mother, in her attempt to avoid any problems and because “the trouble has already been done” said that everything had happened with her own consent as a parent.

although “each parent wants their child to complete school” without influence by the financial situation of the family. According to observations and research among workers at the Family Consultative Center (Shumen), boys stop studying after grade eight because of the need to work, while girls tend to do it just because of a whim. Examples were given with girls in grades seven or eight who simply refuse to go to school, even after the continuous efforts of their parents to make them attend classes.

Dropping out of school is the product of the girl’s personal decision, regardless of the attitude of the parents:

It all depends on the choice of the girl. Take, for example, one of my daughters – she has a seventh-grade diploma, while the other one is studying Bulgarian philology, although she has been married for several years now.

((a family of *Musicians*, Vitosha)

According to social workers’ observations, the elders want the children to have a good education, with better opportunities, while the children are the ones who rush to create families.

Two girls who got married before the age of 18 say their marriage was the product of circumstances (eloping with the boy, pregnancy) and they do not see it a normal age for brides. Students and girls who plan to get better education and have not yet completed the age of 20 say, that *you have to possess at least a secondary school diploma, in order to be able to work*. They hope to be able to find a job by improving their qualification after having raised their children and give examples with many women over the age of 30 who are studying at evening classes, in order to be able to apply for jobs.

According to most of the single boys, *if girls complete their education, they will have a better professional realization and higher self-esteem*. Although they say education is not as important as other female qualities such as being a good wife, they also declare that their girlfriend should possess “at least a secondary school diploma“. The higher level of education does not, however, cast any doubts on the honour of the girl:

I have a girlfriend who also studies law, she is 23 years old and she is single – a good example of a girl who sticks to the traditions and stays maiden. Keeping the traditions does not prevent you from being educated either, but most of them do not see any prospects in continuing school. If the ideal is to be a perfect mother, a housekeeper and a good wife, the average girl prefers to marry the first boy she encounters. They see no prospects. For me, personally, very soon, if you are not well-educated, you won’t be able to achieve anything – even the minimum wage will be impossible to get.

(23-year-old, *Horahane Roma*, Everest)

The young, however, are strongly discouraged by the fact that there are no opportunities for development – *why study for a diploma, if people with two university degrees work as mere taxi-drivers, while the neighbors who are without any education at all earn loads as pimps abroad and are the richest people I know*. (a boy from Byalata Prust district).

Parents who insist on their girls’ secondary or higher education are usually those with higher standards and experience living abroad. Visits at the Evangelical church – mainly by the Roma in Vitosha District – also have a positive effect on the choice for continuing school. The negative factors related to school dropouts and early marriages are: extreme poverty and lack of prospects within the family, as well as some (but not all!) cases of children raised by their grandmothers, as the latter may lose

control or, willing to please them, may grant the children permission not to attend school.

The **Novi Pazar** neighborhood accommodates a homogeneous community of people who define themselves as *Turks* and *Millet*, yet are usually perceived as Gypsies by all other communities and are also called *Charale* by the Romani speaking groups who enter marriages with them. The biggest impact on improving the girls' educational status and keeping a relatively high marriageable age among them is that achieved by the Roma Women Association "Hayachi" that support the activities of the Family Consultative Center (Novi Pazar). These activities are carried out mostly by people from the community and with the participation of all institutions and stakeholders, especially local ones, which has led to significant achievements in terms of positive norms and practices among the local community. The organization works both with children and parents and focuses its efforts on work with grandmothers and mothers-in-law who are still the biggest factor in making the most important decisions inside the family or the group. The generation of women over the age of 50 has a better position in terms of integration within the macrosociety because they have worked together with Bulgarians, speak Bulgarian fluently, and often serve as a bridge between families and state institutions. They also take care of the grandchildren while their young parents are abroad. Among most of these women dwells the opinion that girls should not be married early and they highlight examples taken from their own experience: "small girls have no breasts" and "no milk", they "don't know what to do with a baby", "sleep late as they are still kids," and "at the age of 13 are immature and cannot make a sound decision, so they sometimes try to escape and marry a second time or even two more times, leaving their own children behind". Young people are under constant survey and control by the community – in the neighborhood or at school, and there is no doubt that a girl might have lost her honour, even if she decides to get married at an older age.

The ideal model is completion of secondary education, a period when girls usually go out with their boyfriends, after which they get married. Education is considered necessary, as it is "important to get a diploma before the wedding, to be able to feed a family," "what will they feed a family with, if they have no diploma", "diplomas are a required even for the job of a cleaner". Fieldwork coincided with the elopement of a 13-year-old girl, right after her sister had been officially betrothed a week earlier, at the age of 16. People from the community unanimously agreed that the incident had been caused by the extreme poverty in which the two children lived and due to their grandmother's inability to take care of them or feed them. Both girls were married to good families with a sufficient income. Child marriages in recent years were usually concluded between poor girls and "financially stable guys". Such a strategy is common among poor parents or girls coming from families with problems, as indicated by the community workers:

TWe held large gatherings of people from the neighborhood here, with representatives of the institutions such as the Child Protection Department and the police, and we summoned both intelligent and illiterate people. For example, one of the illiterates asked: "If my daughter wants to [get married], should I not agree to give her hand in marriage?" The guy answered "No, you should not" and added "What if I have nothing to feed her with?" The guy just looked at him and could say nothing. You know, sometimes they think their daughters will be better off in the new place, than at home – they have nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, no money, no job.

(a health mediator)

According to the families in the neighborhood, "everyone wants their daughter to be educated" and graduating secondary school is marked by a pompous celebration similar to a wedding. Apart from being caused by poverty, early marriages can also be the result of a girl's whim or her reckless choice

– “girls talk to each other and often get instigated by their boyfriends, since they gullibly believe they can get married.”

If the girl has not completed grade eight, her mother and father-in-law will hardly agree to let her continue school after marriage, but thanks to the work of “Hayachi“, there are such cases now. The parents and grandparents rely on conversations with the girls, in order to protect them from getting involved in an early marriage, saying that “the wedding shall not escape“.

For most single girls the secondary school is a meaningful choice, supported by the family and wanted by the girl, since it will give the opportunity for work after graduation. Some even have the ambition to continue with higher education, as there has been a recent example of two sisters both of whom enrolled at the University of Shumen and are now followed by two other girls, all of them married. According to the girls, their peers marry early, just “because they love their boyfriends and decide to elope – their boyfriends urge them to run away, but our boyfriends say they can wait for us.“

The most common case for girls who marry before the lawful age is actually to escape with the groom, despite the opposition of her parents who may have plans for her education. According to the young men who are single, the choice of a girlfriend and a future wife is entirely theirs, yet if their parents disapprove, they would prefer to respect that opinion. Most of the boys have girlfriends who study at a secondary school. Although education is not seen as the most important quality of a future wife, all boys claim they will support their wives, if they want to study, so they can be able to work after that.

All youths share that their parents encourage them to study and stopping education due to an early marriage is condemned by the family, unless the family is very poor – in that case the boy is allowed to start work and the girl is allowed to get married.

According to the elderly community and the local social workers, child marriages were never considered a tradition and are not widely practiced in the neighborhood. In their opinion, several high-profile convictions would have a serious effect and completely erase the practice of early marriages.

The situation regarding child marriages and lower educational level of the girls is similar in the village of **Zlatar**, where three main groups live: *Blacksmiths (Bir millet, Turkish-speaking Roma)*, *Gadzhikane Roma*, and *Rudari (Kopanari)*, and the village of Salmanovo, where *Turkish Gypsies* and *Musicians* live. In both villages the marriageable age has risen considerably over the past 10 years and after the age of 16 girls are considered suitable for being married off. Both villages have their primary school and, as a rule, all the girls complete their elementary education. Only the *Kopanari*, however, continue their secondary education: the adults of this community claim “we are like the Bulgarians” in terms of education and age at marriage. Among other Roma communities in the two villages, there is not even a single girl who has continued her secondary education in a nearby town, although transport is secured and advertising campaigns are regularly held by secondary and vocational schools. Only a few of the boys (an exception) continue their secondary education, since it is considered sufficient to acquire the minimum necessary for obtaining a driver’s license and a qualification for travelling abroad, where most of the families now live. The communities do not discuss financial issues as a reason for dropping out of school – the main reason is the boys’ lack of motivation to continue beyond grade eight and the additional concern that girls will fall outside the perimeter of family and community control. In the village of Zlatar, all adults confirm that they are against girls getting married before the age of 18, yet they are explicit in saying that “under no circumstances” would they allow their girl study in a big town.

I will not let my daughter become a whore. City schoolgirls walk around in short skirts, smoke,

take drugs, and do not study at all. When my son graduates from school, we will try to send him to school in the town, yet – with strict control ... my daughter I would never let go to high school! I know the schoolgirls in Shumen, they just look for men like me, with cars and gold. What kind of school is this?! No school at all! Nothing gets taught or learned at high school!

(30-year-old man, Roma, Zlatar)

In the village, the ideal age for a girl to marry is 18-19, and for boys it is even later. Cases of child marriages are mentioned as an exception and only in poor and problematic families (the latest case is a girl who grew up without a mother). After the eighth grade, however, the girls practically cannot realize any potential that they might have, and so they remain at home under the supervision of their parents. Premarital interaction is not allowed. The situation is quite similar in Salmanovo: if a girl wants to continue her education in Shumen she is condemned by the elders for her “wish to become a whore” and “desire to pretend to be very smart”. Girls stay at home, spending time on the internet, communicating with friends. In such communities, marriage is possible after the age of 16-17. There are no models of girls’ realization other than marriage and being a good housewife.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



UNICEF Bulgaria/2013/Pirozzi

6.1. Conclusions

General Trends

The educational status of Romani girls, including those married at child age, has been increasing over the last 15 years. The number of child marriages and early births decreased as an absolute value and as a percentage from all marriages and births in the country.

Child marriage is a frequent but not the sole reason for Romani girls dropping out of school. The number of female drop-outs is considerably higher than the number of those married at child age. Research conducted on Romani educational status and the attitudes in the Romani community towards education show that if marriage was the main reason for dropping out of school for the elder generation, in the last two decades the major problems have been related to the socio-economic status of the family, lack of financial means, the existing low educational status, the poor interest on behalf of the parents, and all these reasons in correlation. Some girls drop out before they complete primary school because they expect to get married. For others, dropping out from secondary

school is not related to getting married but to concerns of the parents in case their daughter studies outside the village or neighbourhood.

There is no single unified 'Romani model' in terms of age for marriage and educational status. Generally, there are three models among different Romani groups: 1) a widespread practice is that girls get married at the age of 12 to 15, and the eighth grade is the highest possible educational status that can be achieved (however, not by all girls); 2) completing primary school is the norm, starting secondary school is an option, and 16 years of age is acceptable for getting married; 3) completing secondary school is the educational minimum and, generally, the marital trends do not differ from the ones in the surrounding majority. Therefore, it is important that the steps to be applied locally should be based on thorough knowledge and a mapping of the concrete situations and problems within a Romani group.

Similarly, there is no single, unified opinion among the Roma in Bulgaria concerning compulsory education of children and that of girls in particular. The majority of Roma appreciate education and realise that it gives possibilities for a better life. However, others do not perceive the education to the age of 16 as compulsory (which is the case in Bulgaria). The lack of affirmed models for higher educational status within the family and the community hinders the realization of the right to an education among the groups that do not accept it as social capital for their children's betterment.

Nowadays the majority of Romani girls marry after reaching full age. The access to education for girls is not only related to child marriages or to the ethno-culture of the Romani communities, but also to some more general problems and trends in the macro-society. These are problems of the educational system, such as the lack of secondary schools in the place of residence, the low level of education in the 'Gypsy schools' (which demotivates students and parents), the lack of extracurricular activities, and the overall devaluation of education in the country. The widespread unemployment and discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin when applying for a job are also reasons for the low interest and motivation on behalf of both parents and children.

Social norms in Romani communities related to child marriages

The requirement for keeping the virginal status (the honour, virginity, maidenhood) of the bride is the main social norm for child marriages among the Roma. In communities where child marriage is practiced, it is assumed that sexual maturity puts a girl's virginity at risk and that therefore the girl should be married.

The requirement for a girl's virginity is not a Romani tradition per se; however, it is considered by the Roma to be an important part of their identity. Virginity (as a norm) is still considered to be the main ethnic differentiating marker of identity separating them from other ethnic communities. Putting a sign of equality between child marriage and the virginity requirement results in the misunderstanding that child marriage is a Romani tradition and a norm in Romani culture.

In almost all groups the requirement for virginity is kept in cases of marriages at higher ages as well. If getting married at an older age is practiced by the whole group, there are rarely doubts about the virginity of the girls. In some groups, for example the Kalaydzhi in North-Western Bulgaria, the norm for virginity is gradually fading away, and in others, such as the Baychari in Sliven, that norm still exists although it is often violated by pre-marital relationships.

School attendance is considered risky by some communities in terms of keeping a girl's

honour, therefore suspending education while still in junior high school is considered acceptable by the community.

Key actors and factors contributing to the maintenance of child-marriage practices and their variations depending on the Romani group

Bulgarian Roma are classified as an *intergroup ethnic community*,⁴⁸ consisting of groups, metagroup unions, and subgroups, each with its own identity. **Group belonging takes first place among the socio-cultural factors that influence child-marriage practices and the educational status of females.** In case of an identical group belonging, there are additional factors that are important in how they contribute to the existing differences between models and practices in terms of education and age at marriage: the place of residence (city, small town, village), residing and studying in a segregated neighbourhood, educational status of the parents and the extended family circle, family mobility and life among the macro-society, family financial status, and availability of an active community organization.

The practice of child-marriages is most widespread among various groups belonging to Horahane Roma and Millet in Eastern Bulgaria, called by the surrounding population “Turkish Gypsies”. The data from the previous two censuses confirms that the highest number of female minors in cohabitation is in the regions where these particular Romani communities reside: Burgas, Varna, Pazardzik, Plovdiv, Sliven, Stara Zagora, and Haskovo. More than half of the girls in cohabitation under 16 and 18 years of age reside in these areas. Due to the lack of other behavioural patterns for the young girls in the groups, the only way of realization for these girls is early marriage. Speaking Bulgarian is problematic for the children in these groups throughout the whole educational process, which additionally contributes to their low motivation to continue education.

The reticence of the Romani group to other communities and to the macro-society also contributes to keeping the norms. The educational status of the Kaldarashi girls is low and, generally, the level of social integration is the lowest one in that particular group, regardless of the economic status of the group. Positive trends for completing secondary education are observed among the Kaldarashi over the last several years. The ones graduating university are exceptions, that choice however usually makes getting married within the community impossible.

A conservative factor among the groups practicing child marriages is residence in segregated Romani neighbourhoods within bigger cities throughout the country. The age at marriage among them is changing more slowly in comparison to Romani communities in smaller towns and villages. In densely populated, segregated neighbourhoods (where the Roma live in socio-economic isolation and where no community organizations supporting the education of children act) girls quit junior high school expecting to get married.

Communities seem to be more open to changes in smaller towns and villages. The marriage-age there increases as the attitude towards the education of females changes more dynamically. **However, problems in terms of the access to education are registered in the villages. They are related to the lack of funds or to the lack of a secondary school in the place of residence.** In such places, girls drop out after completing primary education and this is the result of ethno-cultural concerns (fear of losing virginity while studying in another place of residence) or of economic reasons (the lack of funds to support their living costs).

48 Marushiakova, E., Popov, V. 1993. Gypsies in Bulgaria. Sofia: Club'90..

The female is usually the conservative element in the group who carries and keeps social norms but she is also a factor in implementing changes. Grandmothers and mothers prepare girls how to keep their *honour* (respectively, the honour of the family). They raise the children and introduce them (girls and boys) to the community norms as well as guide them through how and when to make their marital choices. The main role in taking decisions about the choice of a marital partner, in the groups practicing early marriages, is still that of the boys' mothers or grandmothers.

The earlier the age at marriage, the greater the role of the elder generation in taking decisions about the marriage. Increase in age is usually accompanied by both higher educational status and greater importance of an individual's choice for deciding on a marital partner.

The common group practice is considered a community norm as well as a referent for the behaviour of each group member; i.e., each member is a conservative holder of those norms, which are explicitly important for the group's identity. Residing in a community where early marriage is a practice and where there are no other available models for life realization other than setting up a family at child age, both girls and boys reproduce and contribute to the support of that practice. **Therefore, working with all community members from both sexes and all generations is of great importance for changing the practice.**

The lack of role models for educated girls in the family or in the community can be defined as a conservative factor. The rule for the correlation between the educational status of the parents and their attitude towards education is valid for the Roma as well: a lower educational status of the parents might lead to a lack of motivation for any higher educational status of the children. Although many uneducated parents support and encourage their children to study, the lack of affirmed models leaves the decision about continuing education on the individual wish of the girl herself, not considering education compulsory.

The lack of funds is among the main economic factors contributing to the drop-out rates of females, without being directly related to getting married. In some poor families, girls drop out from junior high school in order to take part in household activities or in family economic strategies and planning, such as gathering mushrooms, herbs, etc. In Dasikane Roma families (in villages in the regions of Haskovo, Yambol, Sliven, and also in the north-west parts of Bulgaria), the lack of finances is the reason for not continuing secondary education.

In some cases extreme poverty is the reason for girls being married because their families are not able to provide for them. Parents even think that by their daughter's marriage, a better life realization is being provided for her. However, there is no direct relation between the economic status of the family and the educational status of the girls within the family when no practice for educating girls in the group exists.

Romani families and Romani girls' understanding about the risks of early pregnancy and birth while still at child age



Communities view early marriage as getting married to a child, especially to girls under 15 years of age. According to the communities' views, girls at that age do not have the necessary skills for raising children. However, in many places giving birth after the age of 16 is not considered an early birth. Minor girls rely on their mothers-in-law for raising their child.

There are, however, no concerns in the families that an early pregnancy could be risky for the girl who gives birth, nor for her child. While some Roma are reluctant to acknowledge that a minor girl is neither physically nor responsibly mature enough to be a mother, the majority believe that young mothers give birth to healthy children and an early birth is not risky for the mother or the foetus. It has been remarked that even information about the negative consequences of early births distributed in some locations by mediators or organizations does not have a significant effect on the practice of child marriages due to the fact that **the community norm for the age at marriage and the honour of the girls outweighs the hypothetical early pregnancy health risks.**

Girls are brought up by the women in the family that they should keep their honour, but they are not instructed in other issues related to sexual intercourse. In the communities practicing child marriages, girls are not informed and are embarrassed by topics related to sexual intercourse.

Actors, factors, and measures that contribute to change in practices

The course of action for a change goes through a purposeful (programs and projects) or a natural (individual cases) increase in the educational level of the girls within the community. Initially one or several girls acquire/s a higher level of education (secondary, university)

contrary to the established patterns in the community. Afterwards, they become an example for more girls, and thus the process becomes mainstream.

Among the groups in which early marriage is no longer practiced, this change occurred with varying degrees of intensity over the past decades. In some groups these processes occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, in others occurred after 1989, while in third such processes have not occurred yet. The following can be specified as factors leading to a change: the appearance of role models for educated girls, the availability of local leaders and community centres that stimulate the development of a higher level of education, desegregation processes and the 'opening' of schools to the community, and family social mobility and life within the macro-society (in Bulgaria or abroad). Often these factors are interrelated.

As a result of such processes in groups and neighbourhoods, today female students and girls having graduated university become role models for their communities, while 25 years ago there was not a single woman with a university degree. Therefore, initiatives and measures for stimulating the emergence of 'pioneers' are necessary (the first-walkers, an apt definition given by Yosiff Nunev,⁴⁹ for acquiring the highest possible educational levels in those groups where child marriages are still practiced (for example, to encourage girls to acquire the highest possible level of education).

Individual agents promoting such processes are Romani activists and leaders engaged in educational work in their own communities. Some of these leaders and their organisations are the driving forces in the desegregation process. There is a higher degree of social integration and successful realization among young Romani people who are involved in educational activities and who come from communities where organizations with desegregationist activities operate.

The educational institutions responsible for teaching Romani children can be specified as factors bringing change (as well as factors responsible for the lack of change). Activities and measures implemented at school aiming at raising the interest of the community in its own culture (e.g. publications, local folklore study, events reproducing customs) lead to an increase in the confidence of the Romani community and build trust between the community and the educational institution. The participation of Roma in teachers' teams or school boards, as well as the close cooperation between schools and community organizations, are also factors enhancing girls' educational status and reducing child marriages.

Among some Romani communities the positive influence of evangelical church leaders is observed. In most cases pastors encourage young believers to complete the highest level of education. They also organize educational activities, thus helping the youngest children in the training process. The potential of religious leadership may be used for future activities after careful assessment of the situation in the local community.

Family mobility and living in the Bulgarian macro-society, or abroad, in most cases is a factor positively influencing the educational level of girls. Studying in schools that are not segregated, or with Romani students entirely, and meeting positive micro-society models give more life path alternatives without violating ethnic identity. Families do not feel discriminated abroad and view their children's education as social capital for integration in that environment.

49 Nunev, Y. 2008. Pioneer in Roma community. (Socio-pedagogical and demographic aspects). Sofia: S.E.G.A. Foundation.

The parents from the younger generation (between 20 and 40 years of age) in the groups practicing early marriages express a desire for a higher level of education for their daughters/grand daughters and a higher marriageable age. That generation would become the bearer of changes in case stimulating incentives encouraging parents in their intentions are applied.

Weaknesses in policies and practices at the national and local levels

The main problems are related to the implementation of the prescribed measures, especially those aiming at child marriage prevention and regulations at the local level. The strategic documents and plans for educational integration of the Roma **do not pay the necessary attention to the education of Romani girls nor to the measures needed to keep them in school.**

The existing legislative framework seems comprehensive in terms of the distribution of rights and responsibilities. There is, however, still **a lack of a working mechanism for its implementation with the participation of all institutions.** In the majority of cases of dropouts and married girls, institutions merely consider this to be a 'tradition of the ethnic community'.

As a result of the pro-active position of the State Agency for Child Protection and the two bilateral agreements signed, the Prosecution initiates proceedings concerning cohabitation with minor mothers. The sentences imposed in 2012 were 267 and in 2013 they were 387. The main problem in SACP's activity as well as that of other institutions is the fact that the measures are taken after children's rights are violated, without fulfilment of the foreseen preventative measures. **Institutions still act by using the mechanism of sanctions and not of child marriage prevention,** even though such measures at both the central and local governmental levels are presumed by legislation.

There is a lack of commitment on behalf of local authorities to resolve the issue in municipalities where child marriage is practiced. Social workers are perceived as sanctioning and bureaucratic, and not as providers of community services. Social workers, due to limited resources and capacity for being engaged with the community, fail at implementing the preventive actions which they are charged with administering.

The number of Roma in the fields of social services and education is insufficient. In most parts of Bulgaria the participation of Roma in the management of schools and among teaching staff is very limited, even in schools with only Romani students.

Good policies, practices, and projects

Overcoming the practice of child marriages occurs not as a result of possible or already imposed sanctions but as an outcome of factors such as: the gradual popularisation of a higher level of education among Romani girls, as well as graduation becoming an important part of the individual girl's life; the long-term activities of local organisations based in Romani neighbourhoods that work with schools and all institutions; the active role of schools in working with parents, organizing extracurricular activities, and the opening of schools; the social mobility of the family and labour migration within the country or abroad.

The 'Amalipe' Centre for Ethnic Dialogue and Tolerance has focused on the issue, especially within the child marriages prevention project (implemented in 2010). Good practices can be identified in the everyday work of community organisations as they usually contribute to increasing the educational status of girls and, respectively, the age at marriage. There are many positive examples of raising

the educational level of girls, as well as raising the trust between the school as an institution and the community in localities where schools have been opened up for the local Romani community, and extracurricular activities, projects and initiatives, including activities that put Romani culture and traditions in focus, have been developed.

Child marriage issue exists in other Romani communities, particularly in the neighbouring Balkan countries. In 2014 this was explicitly addressed at the European level in the report *Making Early Marriages in Roma Communities a Global Concern*, issued by the European Roma and Travellers Forum at the Council of Europe and the Platform of Roma women ‚Phenjalipe‘ (Sisterhood).

The analyses of Bulgarian and foreign experiences outline some good practices:

- **Desegregation activities**, as the girls typically included in these activities (during their primary years) continue to secondary education;
- **Extracurricular activities** for children, especially those related to Romani culture and identity, and interactive and sports activities that make school more attractive to children;
- **Building role models** by engaging successful Romani girls with activities in the community (an example of such are Romani women working as health mediators and social workers);
- **Schools' proactive approach**, continuously working with families as well as being involved with community and school life;
- **Development of economic opportunities for women in the community** with a higher level of education.

Examples of such activities are being implemented by Sham Foundation (Montana), Tundzha municipality, Naangle–2001 Foundation (Berkovitsa), Amala Foundation (Dupnitsa), Romani Women's Association ‚Hayachi‘ (Novi Pazar), School projects within the Second Chance Programme, Activities developed by The ‚Amalipe‘ Centre for Ethnic Dialogue and Tolerance, schools that have implemented projects supported by the Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities at the Ministry of Education and Science.

An important part of the work in community organisations is that they develop activities according to the specific situation in the settlement, neighbourhood, and even according to the individual case of each girl who has married early, or who is threatened to do so.

Since problems vary in the different groups and places of residence, the strategies to prevent child marriages should be local, based on good knowledge of the situation, mapping of the problems, and suggestions for concrete solutions according to the context of the community and the locality.

6.2. Recommendations⁵⁰

The measures that should be undertaken need to be systematic and long-term, not short-term projects. Whenever possible, they should be carried out by organisations and individuals from the respective communities.

⁵⁰ The recommendations are made on the basis of the implemented study and my expertise. When the recommendations are not made by the author of the report, but were frequently mentioned by experts interviewed, parentheses indicate by whom recommendation was made.

With regard to state institutions and authorities

- To implement 'the map of the problem' (of early marriages) provided for in the National Strategy for the Child 2008-2018, using various sources of information, such as the 'Register of children excluded from the educational system' and the Mapping for the identification of children and families at risk' conducted by the Family Consultative Centres, so that all regions where this practice is widely spread can be described. The mapping needs to be combined with in-depth research and a thorough description of the local situation in order to provide adequate measures for prevention;
- To implement the measures for prevention of early marriages and to work with those communities where they are practiced, as provided for in the section 'Health' of the National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020) and the Action Plan for the period 2011-2015 to the Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to the Ethnic Minorities;
- Priorities to be included in the educational integration strategies and plans at national, regional, and municipal levels, as well as objectives and activities directly related to the prevention of Romani girls dropouts due to early marriages;
- To assist the authorities at municipal, regional, and national levels to implement the planned activities for Romani girls' prevention from school dropouts by assessing the situation in local communities and developing specific prevention measures that would provide solutions which could be adequate to the existing problems;
- The issue about the educational status of Romani children and Romani girls to be included in strategic policy documents relating to the mainstream educational system with a special emphasis on child-dropout due to child marriages;
- The 'National strategy for early births prevention', developed by SACP, to be focused on preventive measures and to be engaged with the community rather than on strengthening sanctions and penalties;
- The plans for improving the educational access to include measures for reintegration of girls who dropped out of school due to marriage, but who would like to continue their education (there are many girls who concluded child marriages and divorced soon afterwards, now living again with their parents and willing to continue education);
- To make an expert assessment of the effect that the foreseen measures and amendments to the Law on Social Benefits for Children would have on minor mothers and their families;
- To design programs and prepare manuals for capacity building among social workers and officers in local institutions, as a guideline for preventive work being done for child marriages and school dropouts among local Roma communities. An aspect of capacity building should focus on the elimination of the still existing stereotype that 'child marriages are a Roma tradition'.
- To promote the participation of Roma in social services at the local level so that Roma social workers can be recognized by their communities as being a part of them. At present, the social service system works through the mechanism of sanctions applied by the state and recognized by the Roma as something negative. Instead, it should become a service provider for the community which should be able to trust it and rely on it for solving social problems;
- To bind all social benefits for members of the family to children's school attendance until the age of 16 (*a proposal on behalf of all local social workers and activists at local and national levels*).

With regard to education

- To conduct a public awareness campaign presenting Romani girls who continue their secondary education (coordinated by UNICEF in potential collaboration with National Network for Children, and with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy, US Embassy, and other missions having expressed interest in supporting such initiatives);
- To stimulate the improvement of Romani girls' educational status by introducing scholarship programs for girls, especially for those studying in high schools and universities (Structural Funds, Ministry of Education and Science funds). This would lead to an increase in the number of girls standing as role models for other girls in the community;
- To develop scholarship programs for the education of Roma in the university disciplines Pedagogy and Social Work, aiming at providing social workers and educators who would work in and for their own communities;
- To encourage schools to reintegrate married girls who divorced soon afterwards;
- To develop activities and initiatives involving parents of primary school children in those localities where the number of early marriages is particularly high. The aim is to link elder generations in Romani neighbourhood to the school institution by activities like ,a workshop for parents', ,coffee with grandmothers', ,learning traditions', thus building trust between the school and the local community so that it becomes a starting point for discussing issues about the education of their daughters;
- To develop programs for extracurricular activities at the primary school level in regions where the number of early marriages is extremely high: youth clubs (sports activities, painting, dancing, school parliament) for Romani girls, including one-day trips to nearby tourist and historical sites that can be secured by funds (such as structural funds, Ministry of Education and Science funds);
- To include Roma from the local community, and in particular Romani women, in the boards of trustees in schools with a predominant number of Romani students;
- To introduce sexual and reproductive health education as part of the mainstream educational program.

With regard to the communities

- To develop measures for creating role models of educated girls in the community depending on local conditions: to develop measures promoting the completion of primary education of at least 10-20 girls by identifying families to work with and assist in those communities where few girls complete primary education (Nova Zagora, Stara Zagora, *Goli Tsigani* in Sliven and around the Sliven region); to assist 10-20 girls in completing secondary education through working with families, scholarships, pedagogical supervision in communities where the maximum level of education is primary;
- To strengthen the activities of community organizations with long term experience and a capacity in the field of Romani education, to develop youth activities and measures tailored to the local community needs in order to increase the educational status of Roma girls (for example Naangle 2001 Foundation in Berkovitsa, evangelical churches in Sliven);

- To stimulate setting up formal or informal organizations of Romani women drawing on the experience of the Romani Women Association ‚Hayachi’ in places where the number of early marriages is considerably high but where no community organizations act;
- To carry out activities linking the local community to schools by the establishment of ‚parents’ clubs’ and organizing events related to the culture and tradition of the local community with the aim of building mutual trust. Such successful practices are met in schools implementing projects targeted at working with parents (the experience of the Centre for Educational Integration of the Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities can be applied). Some projects implemented within the Second Change Programme have also opened up schools to the local community, resulting in increased school attendance of Roma children;
- To start working systematically with the generations of women above the age of 40 in communities where these women take the key decisions regarding marriages and girls’ realization. This can be done as informal conversations - ‚a club’ or ‚coffee table’ to discuss topics about life and sensitive issues as the marriage age, damages caused by child marriages and early pregnancies, risks of divorce after an early marriage, the benefits of education, applying positive and negative examples of the life path of girls from the local community (the experience of Romani Women’s Association ‚Hayachi’ / Family Consultative Centre in Novi Pazar working with young and elder women can be multiplied). This can be realised only with the active participation of a local community organization in conjunction with women from the community;
- To encourage the development of youth clubs, meetings, informal discussions, etc., in the communities where decisions about further education and marriage are taken mostly by the youngsters themselves. Educated young women from the local community that are both successful in their professions and have a family should take participation in such activities;
- To conduct community-tailored campaigns explaining why education until 16 years of age is compulsory, as well as about the prohibition of child marriages and the reasons for the sanctions stipulated by the law;
- To conduct community-tailored forms of debates and meetings with institutions: police, local authorities, the Prosecutor’s office, Child Protection Department, and aiming at explaining why child marriages are prohibited by the law, without blaming or threatening but giving positive examples from familiar Romani communities. In this way the community may become aware that child marriage is a social issue which can be overcome without losing Romani identity. During the debates the benefits associated with education should be also discussed – learning languages (which could facilitate migration abroad), the opportunities for career and local business afforded by diploma certificate, etc.

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Strategic plan for the period 2014-2016 of the State Agency for Child Protection

Strategy for the educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities (2015-2020)

Strategy for reduction of school drop-outs (2013-2020)

7. APPENDIXES

7.1. Appendix: List of locations and target groups, participating the in field work

Location	Romani groups	Girls in child marriage	Girls – unmarried, 15-20 years	Boys – unmarried, 15-20 years	Female students	Families	Females
REGION OF MONTANA							
Town of Montana, Kosharnik neighbourhood	<i>Kalajdzhii Koshnichari Reshetari</i>	5	4	6	1	6	3
Town of Montana, Ogosta neighbourhood	<i>Kalajdzhii</i>	-	4	5	3	5	7
Town of Berkovitsa, Rakovitsa neighbourhood	<i>Muhchii Koshnichari</i>	4	4	4	-	4	3
Village of Dolni Tsibar, Vulchedrum municipality	<i>Kalajdzhii</i>	1	4	3	2	4	3
REGION OF SLIVEN							
Town of Sliven, Nikola Kocheva neighbourhood	<i>Baychari</i>	3	3	6	2	4	3
Town of Sliven, Nadezhda neighbourhood	<i>Turks Goli tsigani Musicians Gradeshki</i>	4	2	5	-	7	4
Town of Nova Zagora, neighbourhood Sixth	<i>Turkish identity</i>	5	4 (under 15 years)	4	1	5	6
Village of Gradets, Kotel municipality	<i>Gradeshki / Woodcutters</i>	3	4	5	1	4	3
REGION OF SHUMEN							
Town of Shumen, neighbourhoods Vitosha and Boyan Bulgaranov	<i>Horahane roma Musicians</i>	2	3	4	2	7	4
Town of Shumen, neighbourhoods Everest and Byalata Prast	<i>Horahane roma</i>	3	4	5	3	6	5
Town of Novi Pazar	<i>Millet / Charala</i>	4	8	6	1	6	3
Village of Zlatar, Veliki Preslav Municipality	<i>Horahane Kovachi Rudari</i>	2	3	4	-	4	3
Village of Salmanovo, Shumen municipality	<i>Musicians</i>	-	2	4	-	2	3
Total		36	49	61	16	64	50

7.2. Appendix: List of experts and activists interviewed

In Bulgaria

- Asen Asenov Kirisha, Romani activist and health mediator in Shumen municipality
- Borislav Borisov, Head of Child Protection Department – Montana
- Valery Belov, expert on Romani issues in Montana municipality
- Vaska Radulova, health mediator in Berkovitsa
- Velcho Krastev, PhD, Regional craftsmen association “Tehnitari“, member of the NCCEI
- Veselin Lazarov, pastor in Christian Center, town of Shumen
- Assoc. Prof. Vesselin Popov, PhD, ethnologist
- Dimitrina Dimitrova, teacher and health mediator in Valchedrum municipality
- Dimitinka Demireva, teacher and PhD student (Shumen/Sofia)
- Dimitrina Mineva, manager of kindergarden number 34 “Spring rainbow“, town of Shumen
- Dimitar Georgiev, Romani activist
- Assoc. Prof. Elena Marushiakova, ethnologist
- Encho Hristov, pastor in Antiohija church, town of Sliven
- Zlatko Mladenov, Romani activist
- Jordanka Hristova, health mediator in Nikola Kochev heighbourhood, town of Sliven
- Kameliya Nikolova, Head of Child’s Rights Control Directorate at the SACP
- Kolyo Kolev, health mediator in the village of Gradets, Kotel municipality, region of Sliven
- Christian Hristov, health mediator in Shumen municipality
- Lilyana Kovatcheva, PhD, Head of the Center for educational integration of children and students from the national minorities
- Lyudmila Petrova, Student society for the development of the multi-ethnic dialog
- Margarita Hristova, health mediator in Nikola Kocheva neighbourhood, town of Sliven
- Maria Nikolova, Family Consultative Center – Novi Pazar, Romani Women’s Association ‘Hayachi’
- Natasha Todorova, health mediator in Nadezhda neighbourhood, town of Sliven
- Ognyan Issaev, Romani activist and journalist, Roma Education Fund representative for Bulgaria
- Petar Tsvetanov, health mediator, member of NCCEIE, Head of National network of the health mediators
- Romyan Russinov, Romani activist
- Sasho Yordanov, health mediator in Nadezhda neighbourhood, town of Sliven
- Sergi Karakashev, Romani activist, vise-president of NCCEIE
- Silviya Stancheva, Romani activist, teacher in Shumen

- Sonya Rumenova, health mediator in Montana municipality
- Stanka Tacheva-Yorgova, Business center / Business incubator Association, town of Nova Zagora
- Stefan Panayotov, GP & Romani activist, town of Sliven
- Suzana Borisova, health mediator in Novi Pazar municipality
- Teodora Krumova, Center for multiethnic dialog and tolerance Amalipe
- Prof. Hristo Kyuchukov, pedagogist and Romani activist
- Yusein Shakir Yusein, activist, Novi Pazar
- Team of Family Consultative Center – Shumen
- Team of Family Consultative Center – Novi Pazar

Abroad

- Agnes Daroczi (Hungary), Romani activist
- Aleksandra Milojković-Novikova (Serbia), Ministry for Human and Minority Rights of Serbia
- Angelina Demeter –Taikon (Sweden), Romani activist, expert on Romani children education at the government of Kingdom of Sweden
- Behija Ramović (Montenegro), Romani activist, expert on Romani issues at the government of Montenegro
- Isabela Mihalache (Romania), Romani activist, DOSTA! Campaign of the Council of Europe, Romani women informal network *Phenljalipe*
- Jelena Jovanović (Serbia), Romani activist and researcher
- Mozes Heinschink (Austria), expert on Romani issues and culture, honorary member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences

