



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

SUMMARY

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This summary highlights the main conclusions from the report *Social norms in Romani communities that prevent girls' access to education and especially to secondary education* commissioned by UNICEF – Bulgaria and prepared by Sofiya Zahova, PhD. The report is based on research of the behavioural patterns imposed by the socio-normative system of Romani communities, which are related to the education and school dropout rates of Romani girls. The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods and was implemented in two phases:

- 1) Documentary analysis of existing reports, research, statistical data, and strategic documents;
- 2) Field research in Romani communities in the regions of Montana, Sliven, and Shumen, as well as interviews with Romani leaders and experts in the fields of Romani education and culture. This field research included: more than 25 small focus groups conducted (110 girls and boys in total, between the ages of 15 to 20); 169 meetings in Romani communities (with girls married before full age, e.g. under 18, families from various Romani groups, females from different generations, and Romani students); and 47 interviews with experts and Romani leaders. The research results aim at setting up the basis for a series of supportive activities and preventive measures that will contribute to decreasing the number of school dropouts and increasing the educational status of Romani girls.

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. In 2001, 6181 girls under 18 years of age were in cohabitation, 2283 of them aged under 16. For a 10-year period the number of girls in cohabitation under 18 decreased by about 30% and in 2011 their number was 4334. The decrease in the number of 16-year olds in cohabitation was more than 33% (numbered at 1505 in 2011). The number of mothers under 16 and under 18 years of age having given birth to a first child has also decreased during the last several years, a trend explicable by a decrease in the number of child marriages and cohabitations. In 2013, 2705 girls under 18 have given birth to a first child, 790 of them aged under 16. The number of girls under 18 having given birth to a second and a third child is still high, but nevertheless is also decreasing.

54% of the married minor girls have either primary or lower education. A positive trend is observed in terms of increasing the number of those having completed primary education. The percentage of girls under 16 years of age in cohabitation and with primary education was 23,5% in 2001 and increased to 27,5% in 2011. In 2001, it was observed that 42% of 18-year-old girls completed primary education, and by 2011 this percentage was 45%.

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.

1. 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.

2. 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* 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).

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.

3. 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.

4. 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 Josiff Nounev) 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.

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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS



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.

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.