

EUROPEAN ROMA AND TRAVELLERS FORUM &
ROMANI WOMEN INFORMAL PLATFORM "PHENJALIFE"



**MAKING EARLY MARRIAGE
IN ROMA COMMUNITIES
A GLOBAL CONCERN**

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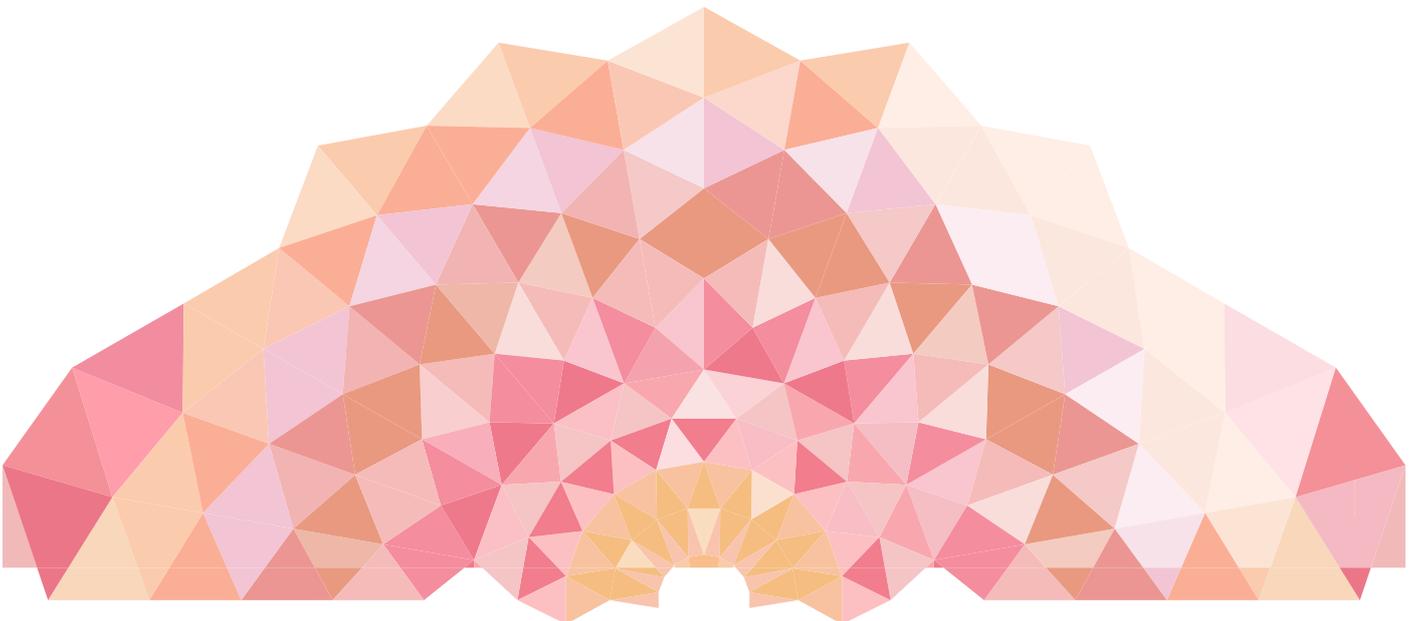
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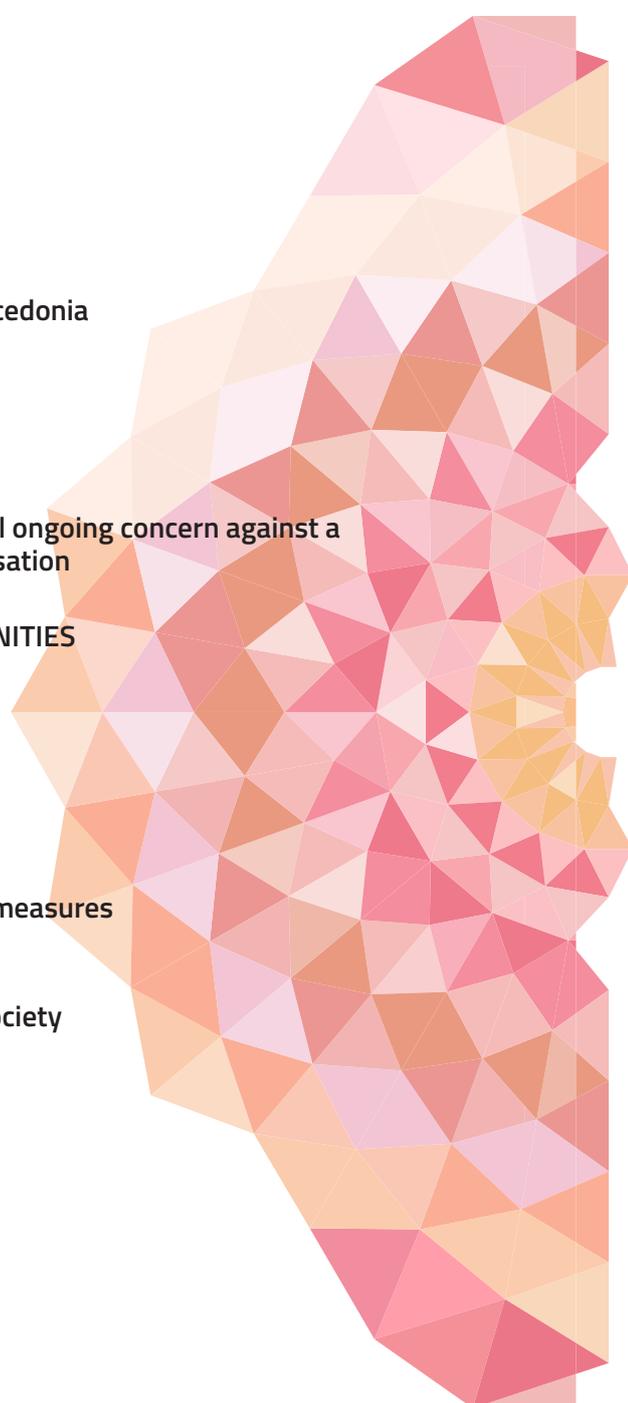
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Contents

4	INTRODUCTION
4	I. AVAILABILITY OF DATA
5	Albania
5	Bulgaria
5	Bosnia and Herzegovina
6	Italy
6	Kosovo*
6	The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
6	Montenegro
6	Republic of Serbia
6	Romania
8	II. CHILD/ EARLY MARRIAGE: A global ongoing concern against a backdrop of inequality and marginalisation
9	EARLY MARRIAGE IN ROMA COMMUNITIES
12	CONCLUSION
12	LEGISLATIVE MEASURES
12	SUPPORTIVE MEASURES
12	Social and economic measures
13	Educational and anti-discrimination measures
13	Health measures
14	Empowerment and the role of civil society
14	Improving data



// WE CANNOT CREATE A ROMA PROBLEM, THE EARLY MARRIAGES, WHEN THEY HAVE BEEN PRACTICED FOR LONG IN THE OTHER CULTURES TOO. WE RISK CREATING A STEREOTYPE OUT OF THIS PHENOMENON //

NICOLAE GHEORGHE

INTRODUCTION

At the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM) meeting in May 2013, CAHROM Experts agreed to address the issue of early and forced marriage and its relation to human trafficking. Resolution 1468 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe defines child marriage as “[...] the union of two persons at least one of whom is under 18 years of age”¹. In most of the reports, notably those from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which are covering child marriage in several South East European countries, it is defined as the “union of two persons, officially or unofficially, at least one of whom is under eighteen years of age”².

In the context of the CAHROM meeting on trafficking in Roma communities and its links to child marriage, the European Roma and Traveller’s Forum and the Informal Platform of Romani Women “Phenjalipe” have prepared a paper which aims to caution against the danger of further stereotyping and victimising Roma communities by labeling early or child marriage in Roma communities as a cultural specificity. This paper aims to raise awareness on the topic and demonstrate that child and early marriages must be addressed in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the specific situations that exist as well as the historic and socio-economic factors contributing to this practice and its perpetuation. In addition, this paper seeks to deconstruct the view that state authorities bear no responsibility for early and child marriage, which is a widespread stance sustained by their labeling as ‘internal Roma cultural practices’.

Defining Early Marriage and its presence in European Roma communities: What is the best approach?

I. AVAILABILITY OF DATA

First of all, it is important to underline some the pitfalls faced by anyone trying to analyse the practice of early and child marriages:

- There is a lack of data on early and child marriages in general;
- Statistical data on child marriages disaggregated according to ethnicity are not available in most member states of the Council of Europe;
- There is an unknown and likely significant number of unregistered marriages (due to the age of the spouses or the lack of personal documents).

Many surveys are not representative because of the reasons outlined above. Nonetheless, studies tend to presumptuously assign a certain behaviour or label to almost all Roma communities in Europe, in fact when situations in which early marriage takes place actually vary dramatically from one country to another, and more precisely, from one community to another. Although it is very difficult to make a statement that would be valid for all European Roma communities, several reports generalize local phenomena, specific to certain communities, and project them onto the Roma population at large, thus misrepresenting the reality.

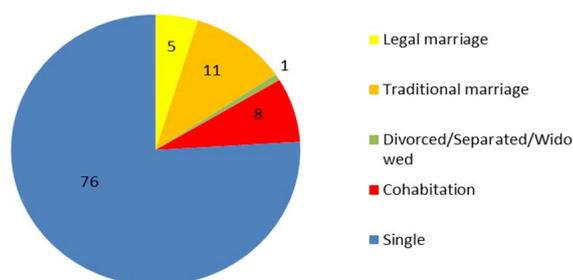
In fact, the 2011 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA survey³ has shown “that across all (EU) member states surveyed, only around 2% of Roma girls aged 10-15 were reported as ‘traditionally married’ or cohabitating with a partner. With regards to Roma aged 16 and 17, the results show that on average around 16% of Roma men and women aged 16-17 were legally or traditionally married or cohabiting. When looking at gender differences in this age group we find that it is mostly young women rather than young men who are married or live together at this age and that among the Member States surveyed, this was reported most frequently by women in Greece, Portugal, Romania and Bulgaria”.

¹ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (2005), Resolution 1468; Forced marriages and child marriages, available at <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/XRef/X2H-DW-XSL.asp?fileid=17380&lang=EN>

² UNFPA, (October 2012) Kosovo (UNSC 1244) Child Marriage-, available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/KOSOVO%20-%20English.pdf>

³ FRA (2013), Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201309/20130917ATT71422/20130917ATT71422EN.pdf>

Fig. 1: Marital status, Roma women aged 16–17 years, (%)



Bearing in mind all the pitfalls underlined above, it is still possible to suggest that the conclusions of Duminica and Ivasiuc in the research report 'One School for All'⁴ are fair, and that the prejudices against the Roma minority occult objective reality. Below is a brief overview of the situation for several member states based on reports and survey that used different methodologies, and can therefore not be properly compared.

Albania

A World Bank report in which 661 households in the minority Roma and Egyptian communities were surveyed found that the average age of marriage among Romani women is 15.5 years while for Romani men is 18.2⁵ years old. In 2011, according to another study, 31% of 13-17 year old Roma girls were married or in union⁶.

Bulgaria

A 2010 survey of 595 households in residential areas of Bulgaria with predominantly Romani populations, including 2746 individuals from all regions and groups of Roma in the country, found that while the average age of marriage or matrimonial cohabitation among all Roma was 18 years, 50% of all 16-year-old Roma with only a primary education or less were already living with a permanent partner, a significant portion of whom likely began co-habiting with their partner before 16, the age at which it is legally possible to enter marriage with parental consent⁷.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

A survey conducted in 2010 by a group of Roma NGOs, on a sample of 527 Roma women, found that 44.21% of them entered marriage before reaching 18 years of age, in most cases between the age of 14 and 16 years. Statistical data for the whole population in 2010 show that "child marriages constituted 0.8 % of the total number of contracted marriages in 2010, and 70 girls aged 16 years⁸ or younger entered marriage". 1.1% of the overall number of live births in 2010 were to girls under 18. Some were as young as 13.

⁴ G. Duminica, A. Ivasiuc (2010), One School for All? Access to Quality Education for Roma Children, UNICEF, available at http://www.unicef.org/romania/One_school_for_all_pt_WEB.pdf

⁵ H. De Soto, S. Beddies and. Gedeshi, 'Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From social exclusion to Social Inclusion', the World Bank (2005), available at <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/0-8213-6171-6>

⁶ UNFPA, (October 2012) 'Republic of Albania Child Marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/publications/ALBANIA%20-%20English.pdf>

⁷ European Roma Rights Centre (2011), 'ERRC submission to the joint CEDAW-CRC General Recommendation/ Comment on Harmful Practices: child marriages among Roma' available at <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/cedaw-crc-child-marriages-submission-9-sept-2011.pdf>

⁸ UNFPA (October 2012), 'Fact sheet on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Child marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/publications/BOSNIA%20-%20English.pdf>

Italy

ERRC field research among Romani women in Italy in 2011 found that of 74 female Romani respondents, 47 (64%) entered marriage before the age of 18; 22 (30%) were below the age of 16 (the youngest were 12 at the time). Of the respondents that married below the age of 18, five women stated that they were forced to marry against their will⁹.

Kosovo*

While the figures quoted here apply to the entire population of Kosovo and not only Roma communities, altogether 14 municipal courts reported 116 requests for early marriage in 2010 and 107 in 2011. No marriages involving minors aged 15 and under were recorded in 2010. The 108 officially registered child marriages in 2010 accounted for 0.59% of all marriages, and only involved 16- and 17-year-old girls¹⁰. However, it must be noted that "immediate registration is particularly rare in child marriage in Kosovo"¹¹.

"The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"

Of the total number of marriages in 2010 in "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", no bride got married before reaching 15, though 13.1% got married between the ages of 15 and 19. If we consider the total live births (which might be more relevant considering the current practice among Roma of not registering marriages officially) in 2011, 0.1% of the mothers were under 15, and 1.8% were between 15 and 18 years old¹².

Montenegro

A 2003 survey of refugees and internally displaced persons in Montenegro found that, of 850 Roma surveyed, 90% married before the age of 16, which is illegal in Montenegro¹³.

Republic of Serbia

According to the "Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010" (UNICEF), 14% of the Roma girls in the age group 15-19 years were married before reaching 15 years of age, and one third had their first child before turning 18. Nearly half of young Roma women in the age group 15-19 years are currently married or in union (44 per cent). This proportion varies between the urban (40%) and the rural (52%)¹⁴.

Romania

While data from an Open Society Foundation report indicates that the practice of child marriage among Roma in Romania is declining with every generation, the average ages of marriage and child birth among Romani women are still significantly lower than those of the general population. According to research for that study, 53% of Romani women surveyed, and 43% of their daughters, married before the age of 18. In addition, 43% of respondents were younger than 19 when their first child was born and the average age of childbirth for Romani women was 5 years younger than the national average age of 24, as reported by the 2003 Romanian Statistical Yearbook¹⁵.

*All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

9 European Roma Rights Centre (2011), op. cit.

10 UNFPA (October 2012), 'Fact sheet on Kosovo', Child marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/KOSOVO%20-%20English.pdf>

11 UNFPA (2012), op. cit.

12 UNFPA (October 2012), 'Fact sheet on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Child marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/MACEDONIA%20-%20English.pdf>

13 European Roma Rights Centre (2011), op. cit.

14 UNFPA (2012), 'Fact sheet on the Republic of Serbia, Child marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/SERBIA%20-%20English.pdf>

15 Open Society Foundations (March 2006), 'Broadening the agenda: the status of Romani Women in Romania', quoted in European Roma Rights Centre (2011), op. cit.

While these figures shed some light on the situation, they are, unfortunately, the only ones available. The lack of data for western European countries is particularly interesting and the explanation for this can be only theorised on. Is the issue non-existent in the Roma communities of France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Netherlands? Is it a topic that is tackled neither by NGOs nor by institutions, besides its legal aspects? What is the situation for Roma migrants in western European countries? Bosnjak and Acton describe that several examples have shown that migrants are “becoming ‘more conservative’ once they have left their home country which can be seen in American Amish and Mennonite communities, as well as in Turkish migrant communities in Germany and the Netherlands, where, for instance, traditional gender-role attitudes tend to be reinforced during the time of migration. (...) The attitudes of the male Chergashe participants [of the survey] in Germany were at times more restrictive towards women than the attitudes expressed by their counterparts from Serbia and Bosnia ¹⁶”. This attitude is also expressed in the Spanish reply to the CAHROM questionnaire on early/forced marriage.

The lack of representative, gender and ethnicity-based data by country and community leads us to question not only the objective reality of the phenomenon but also the accuracy and the relevance of policies and programmes put in place by authorities and agencies to tackle this practice.

There seems to be however a general agreement between researchers working on the issue that the trend has changed in recent years, and that young Roma are generally marrying at a later age.

II. CHILD/ EARLY MARRIAGE: A GLOBAL ONGOING CONCERN AGAINST A BACKDROP OF INEQUALITY AND MARGINALISATION

Child marriage is a practice that has persisted for centuries. Today, it is defined as a formal or customary union in which one or both parties are under the age of eighteen. This practice takes place across regions, cultures, and religions, and though it affects children of both sexes, girls are disproportionately affected.

Although the prevalence of child marriage is decreasing, progress in curbing this tradition has been slow, and in some places the problem remains challenging. The 2010 report by the National Center for Health Statistics in the United States indicates that 2.1% of all girls in the 15-17 age group were in a child marriage. In the 15-19 age group, 7.6% of all girls in the United States were formally married or in an informal union¹⁷. United Nations estimates in 2011 suggest that one in three women aged twenty to twenty-four—almost 70 million—had married under the age of eighteen¹⁸. Many of these women were far younger than eighteen at the time of their marriage; in fact, more than 23 million were married or in a union before the age of fifteen, which amounts to about thirteen thousand girls under fifteen being married every day. Given current trends, experts predict that by 2020, some 50 million girls will be married before they reach their fifteenth birthdays¹⁹.

The practice of child marriage is found in every region of the globe and is entrenched in many parts of the developing world²⁰. South Asia is home to the largest number of married girls; almost half of women aged twenty to twenty-four (46 percent) were married before the age of eighteen, and nearly one-fifth (18 percent) were married by the time they turned fifteen. India has the largest number of married girls in the world, accounting for 40 percent of all child marriages worldwide. Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, with 66 percent of young women married before age eighteen and 32 percent married before age fifteen²¹. The United Kingdom and the United States have the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in OECD developed countries, with teenage pregnancy rates higher in more economically deprived areas. In 2002, a report on England and Wales found that around half of all conceptions to under-18s was concentrated among the most deprived 30% of the population, with only 14% occurring among the 30% least deprived²².

The origins of child marriage are multidimensional and deep-rooted. Historically, early marriage was used as a tool to maximize fertility in the context of high mortality rates. Child marriage was also employed to further economic, political, or social relationships. Today, this tradition is motivated by poverty, social marginalisation and cultural norms, and is perpetuated by gender inequalities and the low status of girls and women.

Economic concerns are fundamental to the practice of child marriage. In disadvantaged and rural areas, where the tradition of child marriage is most prevalent, limited educational and economic opportunities for girls increase the likelihood of early marriages happening. In addition, economic transactions related to marriage often place a value on youth, which pushes poor families to marry off their daughters early on to increase their own economic stability.

Practices such as bride price or bride wealth, where the groom's family gives money or possessions to the bride's, also encourage early marriage, on account of younger brides having a higher value because they can contribute more over time to the groom and his family²³. Ending these marriages can leave girls trapped and exposed to violence.

¹⁷ US Department of Health and Human Services (2002), "Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States: A Statistical Portrait Based on Cycle 6 of the National Survey of Family Growth"

¹⁸ (UNICEF), http://www.childinfo.org/marriage_methodology.html

¹⁹ UNFPA/PMNCH/United Nations Foundation/UNICEF/UN Women/WHO/World Vision/World YWCA (2012), 'Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage', available at <http://unfpa.org/files/live/sites/unfpa/files/youngtowed/GIRL%20CHILD%20-%20Joint%20Statement%202012-10-10-170458-1.pdf>

²⁰ Council on Foreign Relations 'May 2013', 'Ending Child Marriage. How evaluating the status of girls advances U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives'

²¹ UNFPA/PMNCH/United Nations Foundation/UNICEF/UN Women/WHO/World Vision/World YWCA (2012), *op.cit.*

²² Z. Uren, D. Sheers and Ni.Dattani, "Teenage Conceptions By Small Area Deprivation In England and Wales 2001-2" Health Statistics Quarterly Volume 33, (Spring 2007)

²³ Council on Foreign Relation (May 2013), "Ending Child Marriage. How evaluating the status of girls advances U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives"

EARLY MARRIAGE IN ROMA COMMUNITIES

As early marriage in Roma communities cannot be separated from the practices of early marriages globally, the same historic, contextual, economic and marginalization factors should apply. During historic periods of enslavement in Romania, to avoid potential sexual abuse by the slave owners, Roma married their daughters off while they were still very young, as, once married, girls would not represent the same type of interest. At the same time, early marriage was a practice that may well have been perpetuated as a result of the legacy of migrating from Indian, where child marriages have been established for centuries.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of inconsistency when it comes to dealing with early marriage in Roma communities. A number of researchers have begun to examine the issue of early marriage in Roma communities from a human rights perspective, and have denounced it as a 'harmful cultural practice' that violates European norms and undermines the ability of Romani girls to lead fulfilling lives²⁴. Despite this condemnation, however, an adequate response has been lacking to effectively address the issue by state actors, while at the same time involving the affected communities and families themselves.

Early marriages among Roma are often depicted in a stereotypical manner, citing the Roma culture as the cause of the practice. Certain cultural traits specific to the Roma are inflated beyond realistic proportions within public discourse in a society where the Roma are often portrayed negatively in the media. In societies where the perception of Roma has long been primarily a cultural construction by the media, politicians and the state, rather than something originating from the ethnic minority and its interactions with other parts of the population, practices such as early marriage can be easily perceived, portrayed and dealt with as specific cultural traits criticised and caricatured as barbaric, and thus taken to be outside of the state's remit.

Thus, early marriage among Roma is often addressed in a perverse and conflicting manner: it is either defined as a human rights violation, in which case a comprehensive state response would apply according to various human rights standards and national instruments; or it is portrayed as a Roma-specific tradition, which needs to be dealt with within the Roma community, which in turn is ridiculed and criticised. Either way, the response is often inadequate, and it is the Roma community who suffer most.

At present, early marriage in Roma communities takes place to a much lesser degree than 10 or 20 years ago. It takes place particularly in poor, marginalised and traditional communities. At the same time, various intertwined reasons may contribute to early marriage: from youth, love and the desire to form a family union, to family pressure, financial insecurity, lack of perspective, school dropout, placement in state care and lack of family reunification/adoption, sexual intercourse outside marriage, unplanned pregnancy, rape, peer pressure, community practices, etc.

Poverty nonetheless, remains one of the major factors underpinning early marriage, perpetuated and exacerbated to some extent in the last years by the economic crisis and decentralisation in some countries. "Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to an (...) older man (...) is a family survival strategy, and may even be seen as in her interest"²⁵. As a matter of fact, several surveys demonstrate the impact of the economic aspect on the marriage age. In Bulgaria for instance, data collected among the Roma population show that "the higher the net monthly income per person of the household is, the higher the age of concluding first marriage is. In other words, the risk of early start of family life in non-marital cohabitation or after contracted civil marriage is the highest in households with lower income"²⁶.

An NGO from the "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" for child protection explains that "child marriages are most frequently found among Roma. In general, child marriages are associated with low economic and social standing of the family"²⁷.

24 D. Z. Scheffel, "Harmful Cultural Practices" in Central Europe: Adolescent Brides (and Grooms) among Slovak Roma, unpublished paper

25 UNICEF (2001), 'Early marriage, Child spouses', Innocenti Digest

26 V. Tarnovo (2011), 'Preventing Early Marriages', Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance

27 UNFPA (October 2012), 'Fact sheet on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Child marriage', op. cit.

One must note that the same observation could apply to the majority across Europe until the middle of the 21st century. It is also interesting to note that in Albania, for instance, the average age at birth for the first child, which is connected to the marriage age, has dropped from 18.9 to 16.9 after 1990²⁸ and the change of regime. Hypothetically, one might postulate that the passing from one economic situation to another, less favourable to the Roma population, had an impact on their social behaviour, notably favouring early marriage.

Interestingly, the Spanish reply to the 2013 CAHROM questionnaire also mentions that in the context of greater exclusion, the age of marriage within Roma communities is earlier. "Due to the current economic and social situation, we are experiencing a return to engagements and weddings among teenagers due, among other things, to the resistance attitude of the Roma community to the "apayamiento" (i.e. enrolment in secondary school, preparation for careers that are not traditional among Roma)"²⁹.

In many cases, the marriage age seems therefore to be connected to the economic situation of individuals and the way they perceive their future. The lack of opportunities for employment appears to have an impact on school dropout and attitude towards marriage. "Although they tend to be blamed for being reluctant to participate in education because of their 'culture' and lack of appreciation of the benefits education could bring to their children, according to O'Higgins, Roma are being severely discriminated against in the labour market where they have lower employment and wage returns to education. Since they have lower benefits from education, it is (from a purely economic point of view) rational for them to turn to alternative ways of living and earning. Amartya Sen argues that we make education decisions according to the extent to which we have reason to value education, both in terms of its costs and benefits now, and in terms of its ability to expand our capability set and enhance our well-being in the future. Clearly, not many Roma perceive educational pursuit as beneficial, at least from an economic point of view"³⁰.

The lack of prospective and social marginalisation also affects early marriage directly. According to Oprea, "the state-sponsored structural marginalization contributes to the vulnerability of under-age Romani women to arranged marriages. The educational level of Romani parents affects their decisions regarding when and whether or not to marry off their daughters. In addition, the lack of educational and employment opportunities for Romani women in Romania also contributes to many Romani parents' decisions – in other words saying 'she's not doing anything with her life anyway, might as well'. In addition, better educational and employment opportunities act to empower Romani women within their relative communities by increasing their options and social mobility"³¹.

Education is thus key to combatting early marriage, but for many Roma living below the poverty line it can be seen as a luxury more than a guaranteed right. Law guarantees access to education but the principle of equal opportunity needs to be supported and accompanied by social protection measures. Several member states of the Council of Europe are not effectively supporting school participation for disadvantaged children. Some research shows that it is more often economic reasons that lead to dropout than early marriage. "Still, it is interesting that the idea of early marriage as the root cause of dropping out for Roma is quite widespread and persistent, despite the fact that the phenomenon show statistically insignificant figures"³².

Moreover, quoting the example of Romania, Oprea suggests that: "Romania's segregation of Romani children in schools for the mentally handicapped, (...) the erasure of Roma from Romanian history books (...): these factors have affected child marriage practices directly as well as indirectly by limiting opportunities for Romani women while simultaneously making marriage seem like a sensible alternative to their parents (who are also education-deprived)"³³.

28 UNFPA, (October 2012) 'Republic of Albania Child Marriage', op. cit.

29 Reply received from Spain to the questionnaire on early/forced marriages in relation to trafficking of human beings. (CAHROM (2013)24prov)

30 B. Bosnjak and T. Acton, op.cit.

31 A. Oprea (2005), 'The arranged marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, intra-community oppression and Romani feminist ideals- Transcending the « primitive culture » argument', *European Journal of Women's Studies* (12)2

32 G. Duminița, A. Ivăsiuc, op.cit.

33 A. Oprea, « Child Marriage a Cultural Problem, Educational Access a Race Issue? Deconstructing Uni-Dimensional Understanding of Romani Oppression », July 2005, ERRC: <http://www.errc.org/article/child-marriage-a-cultural-problem-educational-access-a-race-issue-deconstructing-uni-dimensional-understanding-of-romani-oppression/2295>

Moreover, quoting the example of Romania, Oprea suggests that: "Romania's segregation of Romani children in schools for the mentally handicapped, (...) the erasure of Roma from Romanian history books (...): these factors have affected child marriage practices directly as well as indirectly by limiting opportunities for Romani women while simultaneously making marriage seem like a sensible alternative to their parents (who are also education-deprived)".

Early marriage can hence be considered as a practice strongly connected to a state-sponsored structural marginalisation. This marginalisation has a real impact on the behaviour of a community. "In many cases the specific social existence of the Roma, characterised by spatial, social and cultural segregation often caused by the discriminatory attitude of the dominant population, but also by specific cultural practices, sometimes leads to self-ghettoization. (...)According to Habermas, in an attempt to preserve their integrity, members of discriminated groups insist on preserving the traditions and life forms in which they can recognise themselves". Oprea carries on to say that, "another way in which racism contributes to the oppression of Romani women is through the rigidification of Romani practices: since Roma live within hostile societies that threaten their way of life, efforts to maintain their identity often result in inflexible interpretations of certain practices. Ayelet Shachar refers to this as 'reactive culturalism', a force which 'is not simply the expression of a pure unalloyed culture so much as a result of cross-cultural interaction that has already occurred, in which the state also played its role'³⁴.

The role of the state is also very controversial when it comes to applying international or national legal protections when Romani women or girls are subjected to early marriage. To our knowledge, in no country is there a serious governmental response to the issue of early marriage. Several studies denounce the unwillingness of many institutions to intervene in cases of early marriage. "The most obvious way in which (...) racism promotes arranged marriages of Romani minors is by 'turning a blind eye' to them based on plain neglect or a flawed notion of cultural plurality"³⁵. This unwillingness is often justified with the argument that "this is a Roma tradition, their internal issue". In research carried out in Bulgaria, the Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance concluded that "a great part of the teachers and social workers think that the problem of early marriages cannot be solved (both as an issue and a specific case) and do not intervene"³⁶. The inertia of institutions and the mistrust between them and the Roma community are obstacles to the improvement of the situation regarding this matter.

It is also important to note that while state authorities have a major role in curbing early marriage, while preventing and sanctioning child marriage (under the legal age), state response has to be a cooperative result of international human rights institutions, lawyers, Roma activists and Roma communities. Because the issue of child and early marriage has been neglected for so long, a blind legal response to child marriage, for instance, would not be justified and would not lead to the prevention of child marriages, but on the contrary, could lead to further victimisation of Roma communities and those directly involved.

³⁴ A. Oprea, *European Journal of Women's Studies* (12)2 (2005), op. cit.

³⁵ A. Oprea, op. cit.

³⁶ Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance, op.cit.

CONCLUSION

The ERTF and Phenjalipe have tried through this paper to raise awareness of the issue of early and child marriages in Roma communities and some of the major factors contributing to early marriage, as well as to caution about the risks of further stigmatising and victimising Roma communities by failing to look at the issue in its incredible complexity, but also in the particular context of each case.

As factors contributing to early marriage go far beyond those outlined in the paper, extensive research and data are needed to provide an adequate understanding on the causes and factors contributing to and perpetuating early marriage, as well as on the incidence, impact, trends and ongoing challenges facing the prevention of child marriages in Roma communities.

Finally, instead of denouncing early marriage as a practice specific to Roma communities, Council of Europe member states should learn from each other's experiences on preventing early and child marriages and work on approaches that could instead be suitable for the active involvement of Roma communities themselves.

ERTF and 'Phenjalipe' propose that the Council of Europe draw up a draft recommendation/opinion on the basis of the following measures:

LEGISLATIVE MEASURES

- Comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the specific context of child marriages in Romani communities;
- Develop and enforce measures against adults who facilitate and consent to sexual relations between minors;
- Reinforce the legal protection in combating racist environment in schools against Roma students;

SUPPORTIVE MEASURES

Social and economic measures

- Improve support for Romani girls who escape child marriages through the creation of safety nets such as the provision of shelters, education and health services that can address the specific needs and fears of married children;
- Provide support for economic opportunities for Romani girls and young women in rural communities. This can help ensure that marriage is not seen as the only option available to poor families. Credit schemes should be considered such that they provide genuine alternatives to marriage and do not inadvertently encourage families to marry off girls in order to access credit schemes targeted only at married women;
- Support awareness-raising and public information programmes about the negative effects of child marriage, in particular targeting Romani parents. This may include organising campaigns in Romani communities to openly discuss and debate child marriage practices and impact;

Educational and anti-discrimination measures

- Roma school mediators should be appointed to transmit to the Roma communities the negative consequences of early marriages on education. They should encourage Roma women as mothers to be in the forefront in mobilising forces in favour of the education of their children, both boys and girls. Both girls and boys need to receive primary and secondary education and, whenever possible, university education;
- Take measures to prevent and combat stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by Romani girls in schools and ensure that Romani children are educated in an inclusive educational environment, free of discrimination and harassment. Ensure that policies and programmes to improve school environments and the safety and retention of girls have full support from teachers;
- Revise school curriculum to include elements of Romani history, culture and traditions for primary, secondary and higher education;
- Make a greater commitment to mainstream girls' educational priorities in the national and local integration strategies for Romani inclusion;
- Make available and use structural funds for promoting and supporting Romani girls' education;
- Improve cooperation with Romani communities;
- Adopt a positive approach to change perceptions about Romani communities;
- Introduce scholarships and other incentives to enable girls from poor and vulnerable communities to access education. Review and amend school policies that discriminate against married and pregnant girls and ensure that the content of education is empowering and improves gender equality. In addition, train teachers to deal sensitively with at-risk girls and provide assertiveness advice for girls ;
- Businesses, institutions, political parties, media and international organisations should support the employment and education of Roma women;

Develop campaigns on anti-discrimination against Roma and anti-Gypsyism to prevent and address negative stereotypes and prejudices against Roma and early marriages in Roma communities;

Health measures

- Roma health mediators should be employed and health professionals should be supported to promote anti-child-marriage messages at the community level;
- Ensure universal access to reproductive health services for all young people, in particular Romani girls and young Romani women. Provide access to family planning, contraceptive services and information, and specialist services and care.

Empowerment and the role of civil society

- Empower young Romani women and girls, including married young women, and improve access to leadership programmes;
- Strengthen the role of Romani community-based organisations, especially women's and young people's organisations, to enable them to engage better with community leaders in convincing Roma men that they should share decisions with them;
- Increase collaboration between Roma civil society and national programmes to support, in particular, community-based efforts to reduce child marriage;
- Invest in measures that support the establishment of young Romani women's/youth networks at regional and national level;
- A comprehensive national and European policy for Roma integration should take into consideration the challenges Roma women face in achieving emancipation;
- The European Women's Lobby and the institutions responsible for formulating and implementing policies for gender equality, both national and international, should support efforts in changing traditional practices that are considered contradictory to fundamental human rights norms, standards and principle;
- A European Roma Women Strategy should be drawn up to reinforce the efforts of the national and the European Roma integration strategies and at the same time introduce intra-community related issues.

Improving data

- Strengthen research and data collection systems. Data should be up to date, reliable, and reflect the voices and needs of child brides. Research findings need to be disseminated at all levels to support policy and programme development;
- Exchange of good practices on preventing and ending child and early marriages among Council of Europe member states should be actively supported.

