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Project: “Roma Influencers breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in Roma communities”



ROMA INFLUENCERS NETWORK/2024-1-EL01-KA220-ADU-000247507



[www.romainfluencersnetwork.eu](http://www.romainfluencersnetwork.eu)



[romainfluencersnetwork@gmail.com](mailto:romainfluencersnetwork@gmail.com)



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# Comparative Report on Early Marriages and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities

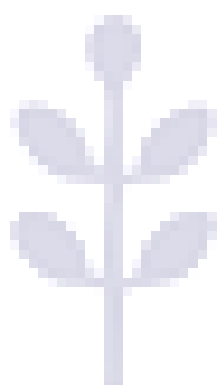
Author: CESIS – Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social

Leader of WP2: Breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in  
Roma communities

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# I. Introduction

## I.1. The Roma Influencers Network Project

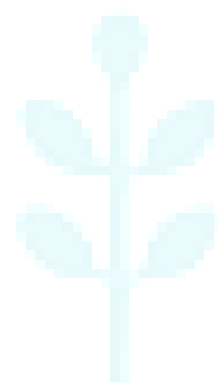
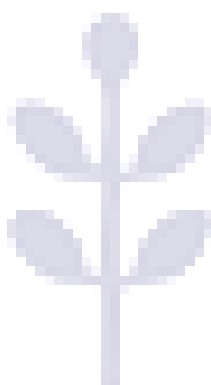
The present report is integrated in the European Project Roma Influencers Network - breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in Roma communities (Grant Agreement n. 2024-1-EL01-KA220-ADU-000247507) in the framework of the Programme ERASMUS+.

Roma Influencers Network project centres on early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities and focused on empowering and awareness raising of the Roma community, especially women and girls. The main purpose is to suggest ways to change behaviours and attitudes in order to overcome, reduce or eliminate the practice and its harmful impacts.

The Consortium of the project consists of 4 countries: Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania.

This comparative report is part of the Work Package 2: "Breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in Roma Communities", and in particular of the Activity 2.2: "National research on early marriages and early motherhood in Roma community in 4 countries" with CESIS as team leader.

The aim of this report is to contribute to a better understanding of early marriage and early motherhood, namely among Roma women and girls in all partners' countries, outlining the legal framework and policies and the situation of Roma community.



## 1.2. Early marriage and early motherhood: Global concerns

Early marriage and early motherhood remain urgent global challenges. Both the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), along with other key research organizations such as the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Girls Not Brides, have extensively documented the causes and consequences related to these practices.

UNICEF (2023) defines child marriage as any formal marriage or informal union involving a child under the age of 18 and it estimates that approximately 12 million girls are married before reaching that age limit each year, many of whom become mothers shortly thereafter.

Early marriage and early motherhood are particularly prevalent in low- and middle-income countries, where gender inequality, poverty and lack of education combine to undermine the rights and futures of millions of girls. However, it also remains a problem in Europe, where it varies considerably between regions. Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania report higher rates of teenage births. For example, in 2021 Bulgaria had the highest teenage birth rate in Europe.<sup>1</sup> If we consider the age between 10 and 14 years, the rate is 1.6‰ in Bulgaria and 1.45‰ in Romania. The rates increase when the age group 15-19 is considered: 38.7‰ and 33.89‰ respectively. In 2015, 11.9% of first births in Bulgaria and 12.3% in Romania were from teenage mothers.<sup>2</sup>

The same source indicates the following rates in Greece: 7.44‰ for the 15-19 age group; 0.48‰ for the 10-14 age group. On the other hand, the rates for Portugal and Ireland regarding the 10-14 age group are 0,07 ‰ and 0,01‰, respectively; 5,75 ‰ in Portugal and 8,3‰ in Ireland, for the 15-19 age group.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 years worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup>Adolescent birth rate, 10-14 year olds: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/adolescent-fertility?tab=chart&country=PRT~GRC~IRL~ROU>;

Adolescent birth rate, 15-19 year olds: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/adolescent-fertility-15-19?tab=chart&country=ROU~BGR>

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20170808-1>

Due to their physical immaturity, adolescent mothers are at greater risk of life-threatening complications such as obstructed labour and obstetric fistula. Their children are also more likely to be born prematurely, with low birth weight or with neonatal health problems.

The consequences of early motherhood are not limited to health. UNICEF (2023) emphasises that early marriage often leads to the termination of a girl's education and the loss of her autonomy and economic opportunities. Girls are also often isolated from their peers, subjected to domestic violence and forced into lifelong dependency.

These observations are supported by evidence from the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). Jain and Kurz (2007) argue that early marriage is deeply embedded in social norms and economic insecurity, and stress the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches that include education, community mobilisation and economic incentives for families. More recently, organizations such as *Girls Not Brides* (2020) further highlight the social and cultural drivers of child marriage. This organization identifies poverty, insecurity, and lack of educational access as major risk factors and calls for localized, culturally sensitive solutions.

In its State of World Population 2013 report, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) explores how adolescent pregnancy often reflects deep-seated gender inequalities (UNFPA, 2013). This in turn points to the need for structural change - changing the environment in which girls live, and the expectations placed on them - and the promotion of human and women's rights.

Collectively, these institutions and researchers converge on key conclusions: early marriage and early motherhood are driven by intersecting factors, including gender discrimination, poverty and social norms. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting girls' health, education, autonomy and future prospects. Effective solutions must therefore be equally comprehensive - combining legal reform, education, access to health care, community engagement and economic support.

## II. Framework on early marriage and early motherhood at a national level

### II.1. A Comparative Approach to the National Legal Framework

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this report is to provide a comparative overview of the national frameworks of all partner countries. All four countries have legal frameworks enshrined in national legislation regarding child protection, including child marriage.

Understanding what defines these frameworks, their similarities and differences is important in the context of the project.

#### II. 1.1. About the concepts

The legally established minimum age for marriage in the four countries that make up the project partnership is 18.

Although some differences are evident, the concepts of child marriage, early marriage and early motherhood are reflected in national frameworks.

Regarding **child marriage**, Greece, Portugal and Romania agree that it refers to any formal or informal union between a child under the age of 18. Romanian legislation does not explicitly define the concepts of child marriage, early marriage or forced marriage separately, but they can be deduced from the general provisions of national legislation. Although there is no legal definition in Ireland, marriage under the age of 18 is prohibited by law, with no exceptions. The exceptions were also removed from the Portuguese Civil Code in April 2025. Prior to this amendment, minors were permitted to marry at the age of 16 with their parents' express permission.

In Greece and Romania, it is still possible for a young person to marry before the age of 18.

Therefore, **early marriage** is the legal possibility for a minor to marry.

The Greek Civil Code states that the minimum age for marriage is 18. However, persons under the age of 18 may marry with the consent of a competent court if there are 'important reasons' for the marriage, with no specification of the minimum age. These reasons can be anything, such as the pregnancy of the minor or an imminent threat to the honour of the minor girl's family, for example in the case of extramarital affairs. The decision is made on a case-by-case basis. Under this system, however, underage girls are not adequately protected from forced marriage, as those with custody of the girl can circumvent this provision. Greece also has a dual legal system, whereby the Muslim minority in the region of Western Thrace is permitted to apply Sharia law. Muftis, who are appointed by the Greek state, have jurisdiction over marriage. In these cases, child marriage is permitted if the girl is pregnant or if she has parental consent. According to Hanafi law, a girl or boy must reach puberty before they can marry. Girls under the age of 15 require parental consent to marry. Hanafi marriages are legally recognised under Greek civil law.

According to the Civil Code in Romania, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18, but it can be reduced to 16 with parental consent and court approval in exceptional circumstances. Such reductions are permitted only in exceptional circumstances, which are assessed on a case-by-case basis. A statement of consent to the marriage from the parents or legal guardians is required. The court must consider whether there are reasonable grounds for permitting the marriage. These reasons may include pregnancy or other circumstances indicating that the marriage is in the best interests of the minor. In some cases, a medical examination may be required to confirm the physical and psychological maturity of the minor. Early marriage also includes all legal or traditional unions entered into before the emotional, physical, and social maturity of the parties involved has been reached, even if the legal minimum age has been met.

In Portugal, early marriage is also a distinct concept from child marriage, focusing on the overall development of the individuals involved rather than specific age limits. The country describes early marriage as *'a formal or informal union between two people, in*

*which at least one party, due to their emotional, sexual or psychosocial development, is unable to provide free, informed and full consent'. (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 15)*

Finally, the concept of **forced marriage** is embodied in national legislation, with similar definitions across countries and in all contexts, forced marriage is punishable by law.

In Greece, forced marriage is not considered a distinct offence, but it can be punished as part of other offences, such as rape, physical and psychological violence, and voluntary or involuntary abduction, as well as crimes of honour. However, the Greek Civil Code establishes the framework for a consensual marriage, as it states that marriage requires the agreement of the future spouses, who must make a declaration in person and without condition or deadline.

The Romanian Civil Code also stipulates that any marriage must be entered into with the free and informed consent of both parties, without any pressure or coercion. Forced marriages are strictly prohibited, and violations of this rule are punishable by law. These provisions emphasise the importance of protecting the autonomy of those involved and respecting their fundamental rights.

In April 2025, Portugal amended the Law for Protecting Children and Young People at Risk to include child, early or forced marriage among the situations of danger that justify intervention to promote the rights and protection of children and young people at risk. Furthermore, forced marriage has been a public offence since 2015.

In Ireland, forced marriage is clearly defined and prohibited by law. The Domestic Violence Act 2018 criminalises forcing someone to enter into a marriage ceremony or removing a person from the country for this purpose. Additionally, the Family Law Act 1995 prohibits forced marriage, which must be based on free will and informed consent.

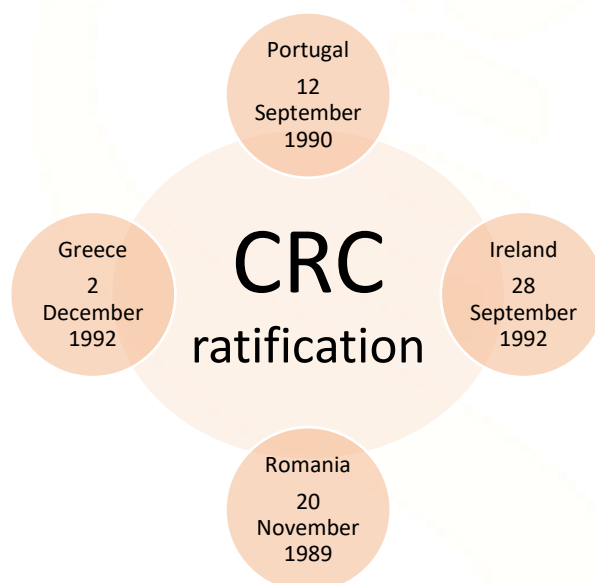
## II.1.2. Law and policy in the four countries

### II.1.2.1. International Conventions and orientations

It is possible to find some convergences regarding the ratification of certain international instruments by the four countries.

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** came into force on 2 September 1990, less than a year after its adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989. The CRC is virtually universal, being the most ratified treaty in history with 193 States Parties. However, to be truly effective, the CRC depends on effective implementation, particularly in domestic law. Full implementation of the CRC by all States Parties remains problematic.

All four of the partner countries have ratified the Convention; Romania was the first of the four to do so.



In addition to the convention itself, there are also optional protocols. These include the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

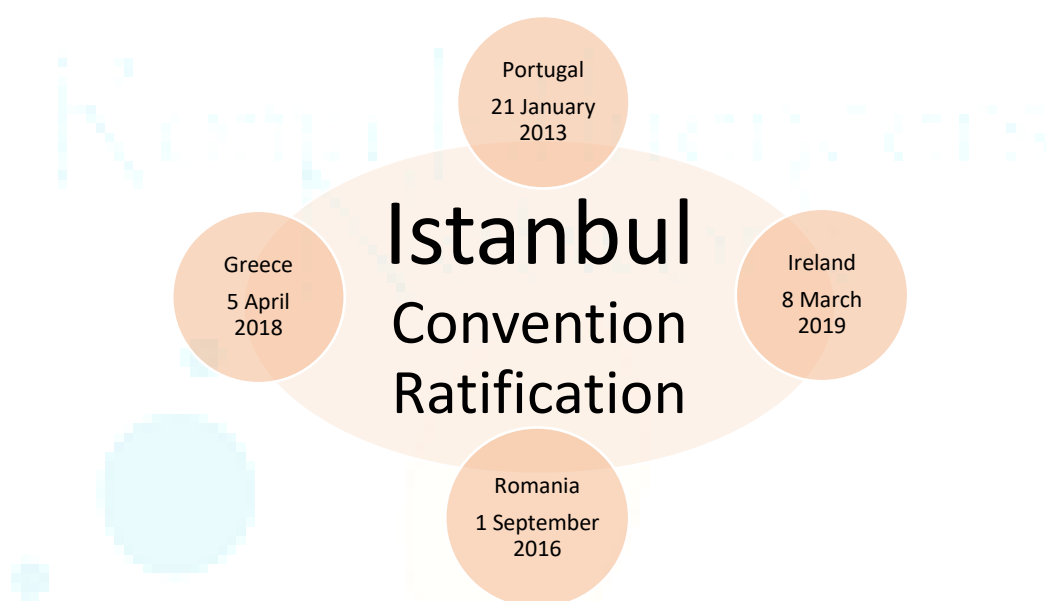
Optional protocols complement and expand upon existing treaties. They may cover any topic relevant to the original treaty, and can be used to address something further in

the original treaty, a new or emerging concern, or a procedure for operating and enforcing the treaty. Optional protocols are treaties in their own right and are open for signature, ratification or accession. They are 'optional' because they may impose more demanding obligations than the original convention, meaning states must independently decide whether to be bound by them. In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted two Optional Protocols. A third Optional Protocol was adopted in 2014, enabling children to submit complaints directly to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Three of the partner countries have adopted the first two protocols, with the exception of Ireland, which has not yet ratified the protocol on the rights of the child regarding the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. However, both Ireland and Portugal ratified the Third Optional Protocol in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The other two partner countries have not yet ratified this protocol.

Another important instrument is the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which was created by the Council of Europe in 2011. It is based on the understanding that violence against women is gender-based violence committed against women simply because they are women. The state is obliged to address all forms of violence against women fully, and to take measures to prevent it, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. Acts of violence such as stalking, sexual harassment, sexual violence (including rape), and physical and psychological abuse at the hands of intimate partners are deeply traumatising. The Istanbul Convention requires its signatories to develop laws, policies and support services to end violence against women and domestic violence.

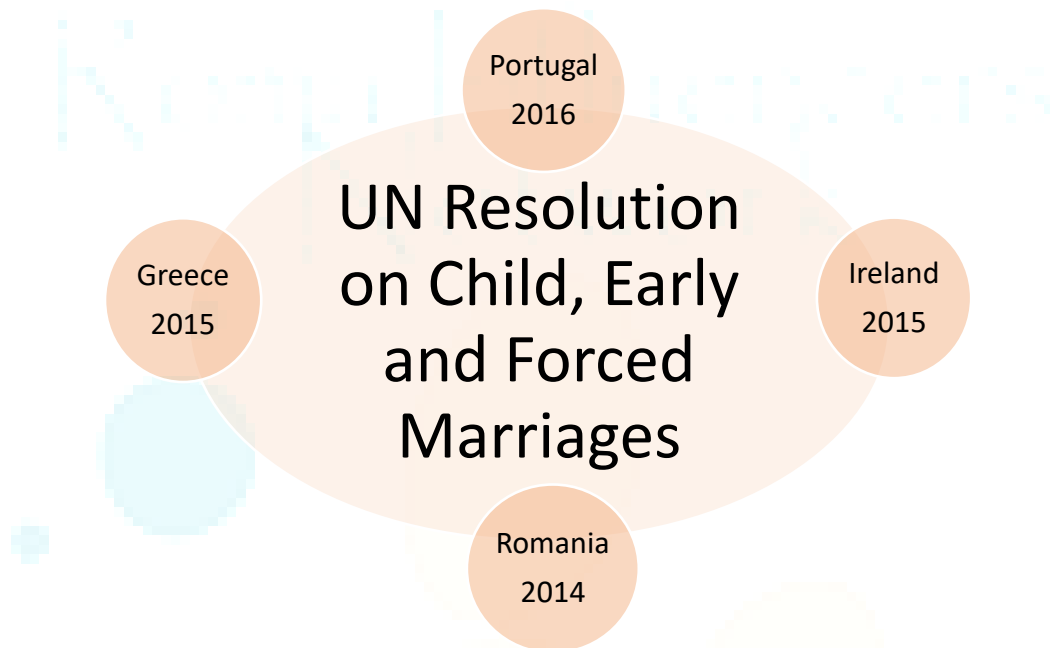
As in the previous case, all of the countries had signed and ratified the Istanbul Convention.



In 2014, the United Nations adopted a **Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage**. These harmful practices violate the rights of women and girls, and the resolution aims to strengthen national advocacy efforts to end them and achieve gender equality.

Although this resolution had been signed by all four countries, Romania had not transposed it directly into specific legislation. Nevertheless, its provisions are reflected in the existing national legal framework that protects children's rights and combats harmful practices, such as early and forced marriages.

In line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, Greece, Portugal and Ireland are committed to ending child, early and forced marriage by 2030: Eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.



#### II. 1.2.2. National legislative framework

The CRC's principles form part of national legal frameworks that protect children from abuse and violence by prioritising their best interests.

The primary piece of legislation in Ireland that regulates childcare and child protection policy is the Child Care Act of 1991. The Act aims to promote the welfare of children who may not be receiving adequate care and protection and covers several key areas of this. However, early marriage and motherhood are not mentioned specifically.

Another law influenced by the principles of the CRC is Law 2101/1992 in Greece. Like the CRC, it is guided by four fundamental principles:

- i) non-discrimination (Article 2);
- ii) the best interests of the child (Article 3);
- iii) survival, development and protection (Article 6);
- iv) freedom of expression and participation (Article 12).

Greece has also set up a National Observatory for the Rights of the Child to promote and monitor the implementation of the CRC. A Juvenile Protection Team (OPA) has been set up in each municipality.

In Portugal, three key laws govern state intervention in cases where a child's safety, health, education or development is endangered due to the actions or negligence of parents, legal guardians or caregivers. These laws are Law 147/99 of 1 September, also known as the Law for Protecting Children and Young People at Risk; Law 14/2007 of 2 March; and Law 10/2012 of 18 May. Until April 2025, child marriage was not explicitly recognised as a risk factor by law.

The National Committee for Children and Young People at Risk was established in 1998, alongside local Child and Youth Protection Commissions at the municipal level. These commissions are responsible for promoting children's rights and protecting those at risk. Until April 2025, situations of early or forced marriage could be classified under various risk categories and be subject to action by these commissions. Following the amendment of the child marriage legislation, however, it is now legally recognised as a risk factor.

Finally, Romania is the partner country with the most recent legislation. Law No. 272/2004 is one of the country's most significant pieces of legislation for protecting children and is inspired by the fundamental principles of the CRC. It provides a solid framework for protecting children from abuse, including early and forced marriages, and requires public authorities to promptly intervene in cases where children's rights are violated.

The Istanbul Convention has also been included in the legislation of all four countries. In Portugal, for example, forced marriage was criminalised in 2015 through the 38th amendment to the Penal Code. Additionally, Law 83/2015 established female genital mutilation (FGM) as a standalone criminal offence, introduced the crime of stalking and revised the legal provisions for rape, sexual coercion and sexual harassment. Furthermore, as forced marriage is considered a public offence like domestic violence and FGM, criminal proceedings do not depend on a complaint being filed by the victim.

In Greece, Law 4531/2018, which ratifies and implements the Convention, is the country's first legally binding text to recognise gender-based violence. The Greek authorities are introducing various positive policy measures to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. These include the establishment of shelters and counselling centres that provide essential services to female victims of gender-based violence. Other regulations have also been introduced to implement the Istanbul Convention's provisions.

Through Law No. 30/2016, Romania recognises forced marriage as a serious form of violence against women and imposes severe penalties for it. The country also has a law (No. 217/2003) on the prevention and combating of domestic violence, which enables the police to issue protection orders to victims of domestic violence immediately. The Romanian Penal Code criminalises child abuse, labour exploitation and forced marriage, and imposes severe penalties for violations of these rights.

In Ireland, the Domestic Violence Act 2018 was enacted to bring together and strengthen laws relating to domestic violence. The Family Law Act 2019 removed provisions that had allowed under-18s to marry with a court exemption. While Ireland has taken legal steps to address coercion in marriage, forced marriage is not currently recognised as a distinct criminal offence under Irish law. In response to the United Nations Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, the Portuguese government set up its first Working Group on the Prevention and Combating of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (GTCIPF). The group was tasked with drafting the White Paper on Preventing and Combating Early and Forced Child Marriage, as mandated by Order No. 1498-A/2021 of 5 February. The resulting document makes a number of recommendations.

In 2020, Portugal also approved the National Strategy for Children's Rights 2021–2024 (ENDC 2021–2024), in which preventing and combatting all forms of violence against and perpetrated by children and young people is one of the priorities, including exploitation, trafficking, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation. One of the planned actions under this objective is to provide professionals with training on early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

The Romanian Penal Code criminalises child abuse, labour exploitation and forced marriage, imposing severe penalties for violations of these rights. Forced marriages are strictly prohibited, and offenders face legal consequences. However, effectively combatting early marriage and early motherhood remains challenging, particularly in vulnerable communities where cultural and economic norms complicate implementation.

In Greece, forced marriage is not considered a distinct offence in itself, but it may be punished as an aggravating factor in offences such as rape, physical and psychological violence, voluntary or involuntary abduction, and crimes of honour. While marriage for minors is generally prohibited, a court can authorise it if there are compelling reasons to do so. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the Greek government raise awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage, particularly within the Roma community and the Muslim minority in Thrace and encourage the reporting of such marriages in order to establish protection systems for victims.

### II.1.3. National policies covering early marriage and early motherhood

Several policies relating to the themes of early marriage and early motherhood are in place in the four countries.

All partners have this type of policy, albeit under different designations, and it serves the same purpose as National Strategies for Equality. Most National Strategies are still ongoing.



As part of the National Strategy, Portugal is implementing the Action Plan for the Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (PAVMD). One of the PAVMD's strategic objectives is to ensure that all cases of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriages are identified within the reporting and protection system and are subject to appropriate follow-up processes.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2024–2026) in Ireland identified certain groups that require specific efforts to promote an inclusive environment. One of these groups is the Roma community. However, there is no specific reference to Roma women, nor to the issue of early marriage and motherhood, which particularly affects women.

The National Action Plan for Gender Equality (ESDIF) for the period 2021–2025 is currently being implemented in Greece. This Action Plan prioritises the prevention of early marriage and motherhood, particularly among Roma women. It aims to inform the Romani population about early and forced marriages, the provisions of Greek law and the rights of the child, and to raise awareness in Romani communities of the consequences of early/forced marriages.

The Romanian National Strategy places significant emphasis on issues that are particularly relevant to the Roma Influencers Network project, such as ensuring equal access to education for girls and boys. Education, and specifically preventing dropping

out of school, are seen as ways to prevent early marriage and teenage motherhood. The Strategy also addresses cultural norms that perpetuate harmful practices, such as early marriage, and promotes awareness campaigns aimed at women. Furthermore, it addresses the issue of early marriage and motherhood in relation to supporting victims of gender-based violence. Support measures are in place to help women and girls who have experienced forced marriage or early motherhood, often caused by social or economic pressures. Roma women are designated as a priority group due to their heightened vulnerability.

Of the four countries involved in the project, Portugal is currently the only one without a National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities in place. However, a national strategy did exist until 2023 and was extended to 2024. No further information on this matter is available.



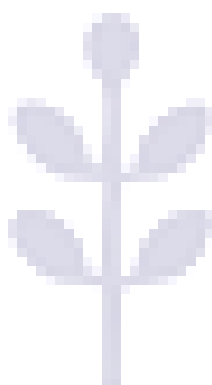
The National Strategy on Roma in Ireland aims to create a safe, fair and inclusive society in which Travellers and Roma can lead healthy and fulfilling lives. The strategy includes objectives relating to areas such as racism and discrimination, as well as education, housing, health, employment, gender equality, culture, and participation. The main target groups are Travellers and Roma. It specifically emphasises the needs of Roma women with regard to gender equality and access to services such as support for victims of domestic violence, health services and housing. Ireland is also implementing the

Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024–2030, which addresses educational inequalities within these communities.

The Romanian Strategy on Roma aims to reduce the social exclusion of Roma communities and improve their access to services and resources by taking an integrated approach. It includes actions in areas such as education, health, housing, employment and tackling discrimination. The strategy's main target groups are women and children, particularly girls. Priorities for these groups include preventing early marriage, reducing school dropout rates and promoting labour market integration.

In Greece, the National Strategy promotes development-oriented policies to prevent and combat poverty and social exclusion. Aligned with the EU's core values of equal treatment, rights, and opportunities for all, the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma 2021-2030 prioritises social inclusion, fostering harmonious coexistence, building mutual trust, and guaranteeing the Roma community's equal participation in the country's social, political, economic, and cultural life. The main areas of focus are housing, education, health, and employment. Particular emphasis will be placed on enhancing the skills of the most vulnerable Roma groups, such as women and young people, in order to encourage their active participation in local society.

Finally, the Portuguese National Strategy, which ended in 2023 but was extended until 2024, aimed to promote equality between women and men in measures to integrate the Roma community. It included actions targeting discrimination, civic participation, education, employment, housing, health, intercultural mediation and gender equality. The issues of early marriage and early motherhood were also addressed.



## II. 2. What it is known in the four countries about early marriage and early motherhood

### II. 2.1. What figures are saying

This section aims to provide a comparative overview of the available data on early marriage and motherhood in the four partner countries. In some cases, the information provided by the partners is not comparable due to differences in the years covered and the type of information. In general, there is also a lack of studies on early marriage and early motherhood that can provide accurate, comparable information. However, wherever possible, the information will be presented in a comparative format.

In relation to early marriage, Eurostat data makes comparison possible. The table below shows the number of marriages involving underage girls in the four partner countries. As can be seen, there are substantial differences between countries. Romania has the highest number of first-time marriages involving girls under 18. In all years considered, the number is consistently above 100. However, the country has experienced a downward trend in the number of marriages involving girls in these age groups.

In general, the numbers are much lower in Greece and Portugal<sup>3</sup>, but Portugal still has higher numbers and an upward trend. In fact, over the years considered, Portugal has seen an increase in the number of girls getting married for the first time in all age groups. Compared to Greece, Portugal has a higher number of marriages involving 16-year-old girls.

There has also been an increase in Greece, but only among 16-year-olds. Marriages involving 15-year-old girls have only occurred in Greece, with no such cases registered in Portugal or Romania.

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<sup>3</sup> Information on Ireland is not available.

**Table 1 - First-time marrying girls, by age and country partner, 2021-2023**

|             | Greece | Ireland | Portugal | Romania |
|-------------|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| <b>2021</b> |        |         |          |         |
| 15 years    | 6      | n.a.    | 0        | 0       |
| 16 years    | 9      | n.a.    | 94       | 124     |
| 17 years    | 37     | n.a.    | 29       | 179     |
| <b>2022</b> |        |         |          |         |
| 15 years    | 2      | n.a.    | 0        | 0       |
| 16 years    | 14     | n.a.    | 106      | 128     |
| 17 years    | 27     | n.a.    | 41       | 148     |
| <b>2023</b> |        |         |          |         |
| 15 years    | 4      | n.a.    | 0        | 0       |
| 16 years    | 17     | n.a.    | 112      | 112     |
| 17 years    | 22     | n.a.    | 54       | 132     |

n.a. – Not available.

Source: Eurostat. Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo\\_nsinagec\\_custom\\_16771466/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_nsinagec_custom_16771466/default/table?lang=en)

As referred to the country's partners, child marriage is perceived as acceptable in certain communities, particularly within the Roma population. According to the information provided, underage marriages are also common among the Muslim minority in Greece, who are under the jurisdiction of the Mufti.

Literature from the four partner countries identified several reasons, some of which are strongly linked, that can contribute to and justify early marriage:

Low educational levels/ School dropouts

Cultural norms/ Need to maintain marriage within the group

Poverty

Religious perceptions

Patriarchal society

Way to reduce the economic burden on the family/desire for independence

The need to control sexual behaviour

Existence of restrictive social norms relating to the role of women

The national reports for each country also referred to the consequences of early marriage, which can be extremely harmful for young girls. National studies addressing this issue point out that the negative physical and psychological consequences of early marriage are undeniable, forming a cycle where causes and consequences reinforce each other:

|                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| School dropouts                                                                 |
| Early pregnancy                                                                 |
| Social control and isolation                                                    |
| Physical and sexual abuse                                                       |
| Deprivation                                                                     |
| Financial and psychological dependence of the young wife on her husband/partner |
| Loss of freedoms                                                                |
| Depression                                                                      |
| Loneliness                                                                      |

According to the Portuguese report, the prevalence of early marriage may be underestimated, which may also apply to the other partner countries. Underreporting is due to informal unions, particularly within certain social groups, where 'marriage' is not officially registered, but rather exists as 'de facto' relationships, i.e. cohabitation without official registration. Such informal arrangements often lack legal recognition, leading to concerns regarding inheritance and social acknowledgement. Consequently, individuals in such unions may be vulnerable in ways that differ from those in formally recognised marriages.

Early marriage and motherhood are serious concerns for young girls, especially Roma girls. The latter often occurs as a consequence of the former. National reports have addressed the issues surrounding this topic. Like early marriage, early pregnancy constitutes a serious violation of children's rights.

As can be seen from the table below, Romania has substantially higher adolescent birth rates than the other three countries. Romania has the highest rate of underage girls

giving birth. In 2023, 648 births were registered to mothers under 15 years of age, and 14,714 to mothers aged 15–19 years.

**Table 2 - Adolescent birth rate 1,000 women in 2021, by country (‰)**

|          | Adolescent birth rate<br>10-14 years | Adolescent Birth rate<br>15-19 years |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Greece   | 0.48                                 | 7.44                                 |
| Ireland  | 0.01                                 | 4.41                                 |
| Portugal | 0.07                                 | 5.75                                 |
| Romania  | 1.43                                 | 33.89                                |

Source: Our World in Data. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org>

Regarding this subject, it is also possible to identify some underlying causes. As mentioned above, becoming a mother at an early age is primarily associated with early marriage. Within Roma communities, early motherhood is considered normal; therefore, it has an underlying cultural aspect. As an example, the Portuguese report states, in certain communities, sexuality is associated with marriage and procreation. In these communities, 'sexual initiation and procreation coincide, so early motherhood is not only accepted, but also desired' (Portugal Report). This persistence of cultural norms that support early marriage is also mentioned in other national reports.

In general, partner countries emphasise that early motherhood disproportionately affects girls from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This phenomenon is closely linked to poverty, vulnerability, low educational attainment, dropping out of school, and limited educational and employment prospects. There is also low utilisation of antenatal services, combined with mistrust of healthcare providers and/or a lack of sexual and reproductive health education.

As with early marriage, becoming a mother at a young age carries risks, particularly physical ones, for both the young mother and her newborn baby.

These consequences are mentioned in national reports, which refer to studies reflecting this aspect. Despite the limited information available on Roma communities, these studies suggest that Roma girls are particularly affected.

One possible consequence of early motherhood is an increased risk of having a baby with a low birthweight, which is more prevalent in Roma communities. The table below illustrates these, and other consequences highlighted in the national reports.

|                                            |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Low birthweight baby                       |
| Obstetric complications                    |
| Premature births                           |
| Mental health problems                     |
| Congenital abnormalities                   |
| Perinatal depression                       |
| Disinterested and unmotivated about school |
| Maternal mortality                         |
| Risk of stillbirths                        |

Indeed, early marriage and motherhood are issues that continue to deserve the community's attention. They are still commonplace, and are synonymous with inequality, social disadvantage, and poverty. They can also have a devastating impact on the lives of many young girls. Above all, however, they violate their rights. Many efforts have been made in these partner countries to find solutions and focus on prevention. Campaigns and awareness-raising sessions are more important than ever. It is well known that these phenomena are most prevalent among the Roma community, which requires significant intervention.

## II. 3. Roma communities in the partner countries

### II.3.1 General characterisation of Roma communities

There are Roma communities living in all four countries, although they are more prevalent in some than in others. In some countries, such as Portugal, the number of Roma people is only estimated, as collecting data on ethnic characteristics is not permitted.

It is important to note that the Roma community in Ireland largely comprises migrants, primarily from Romania as well as other EU and non-EU countries. While some Roma individuals have been living in Ireland for many years, the majority are relatively recent arrivals and are not originally from Ireland.

The table below provides an overview of the number of Roma people living in each partner country. Romania has the largest Roma population, at almost 570,000, and consequently the highest proportion of Roma in its total population. Conversely, Ireland has the lowest number.

**Table 3 – Number of Roma and their proportion of the total population, by country**

|                                    | Greece                | Ireland | Portugal             | Romania |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|
| Number of Roma people              | 175,000<br>(estimate) | 16,059  | 52,000<br>(estimate) | 569,477 |
| Proportion of the total population | 1.5%                  | 0.3%    | 0.5%                 | 3.4%    |

Sources: National Reports.

Despite differences in the number of Roma people in these countries, there are several characteristics common to Roma communities in all of them. These communities are among the most disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised in all of the countries partners in the project.

### II.3.1.1 Roma population in the partner countries: differences and similarities

Although the size and proportion of Roma communities in the partner countries differ, they share many similarities. Generally, they face similar challenges and difficulties, placing them among the groups most prone to discrimination and segregation in all four countries.

A set of characteristics that define Roma people in the countries in question was elaborated on below.

#### **Younger population**

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One of the main characteristics of the Roma population in these four countries is that it tends to be younger than the general population. They also tend to have more children per family.

#### **More risk of poverty**

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This is a group that is particularly at risk of poverty. According to the 2021 FRA Roma Survey Report<sup>4</sup>, 96% of the Roma population in Portugal and Greece are at risk of poverty, compared to 78% in Romania. Regarding severe material deprivation, 59% of Portuguese Roma experience it.

Children are among the most vulnerable groups. According to the same report, there are no difference between Roma girls and boys in the countries surveyed, except in Romania, where 83 % of Roma girls live at risk of poverty, in comparison with 75 % of Roma boys.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Roma Survey 2021 – Main Results* only included data from Greece, Portugal and Romania. Ireland was not included in this survey.

[https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf)

It is in Greece, according to the 2021 FRA Roma Survey Report, 84% of the Roma people is living in severe material deprivation, being that value the highest among the countries surveyed.

### **Housing deprivation**

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A significant proportion of the Roma population lives in poor housing conditions. Situations of deprivation identified include living in houses with no light or heating, damp problems, overcrowding and a lack of showers or bathrooms. As mentioned in the Portuguese report, Roma people generally live in precarious housing conditions and face serious obstacles when looking for a home on the private rental market, often resulting in them having to share overcrowded accommodation.

According to the same Survey, more than half of Roma households (52%) experience housing deprivation across all EU countries covered. In Portugal (66%), Greece (68%) and Romania (70%) the percentages are higher which reflects the difficulties of Roma people. Other aspects present in the report is the overcrowding situations. In this case, Greece presents the highest percentage with 94% of Roma people living in a household that does not have the minimum number of rooms. In Portugal it is 83% and in Romania 87%.

In Ireland, national reports, mainly from civil society organisations, highlight the severe housing challenges faced by Roma communities. These include widespread discrimination in accessing private rental accommodation, severe overcrowding, substandard living conditions, and barriers to accessing social housing. According to the National Roma Infoline Annual Report 2024 (Cairde, 2025), over 70% of incoming calls to the Infoline were made by or on behalf of Roma who were homeless. This data includes individuals living in emergency accommodation or in overcrowded private rented housing. These findings underscore the disproportionate impact of Ireland's housing crisis on Roma communities and the urgent need for targeted housing interventions.

## Low educational level

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The different country reports highlighted that Roma communities tend to have a high rate of school dropouts before completing compulsory education. They also tend to have a low participation rate in secondary education.

As mentioned above, early marriage and motherhood are important factors influencing early school leaving, particularly among Roma girls. This is particularly evident in the Portuguese report, where Roma girls face the greatest obstacles when they enter adolescence, unlike in the general population. They are expected to leave school and prepare for marriage.

The Irish report states that the percentage of Roma people with a third-level qualification is lower than in the general population. Also regarding the 2021 FRA Roma Survey Report, Roma people aged between 20 and 24 years who completed at least the upper secondary education is very low compared to the general population. Portugal is which present the lower percentage (10%). In Greece this value is 16% and it is in Romania where the percentage is higher – 22%.

## Discrimination

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National reports have highlighted that the Roma population faces discrimination on the basis of its Roma identity in several areas. The most common issues are access to education and healthcare, and employment and housing in the private rental sector. According to the 2021 FRA Roma Survey Report, on average, every fourth Roma respondent (25 %) felt discriminated against based on their ethnic background in the 12 months preceding the survey. Portugal is the country with highest percentage with 62%, followed by Greece with 53%. Romania presents 20%.

## Poor health situation

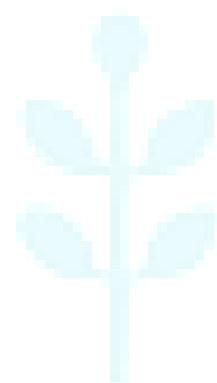
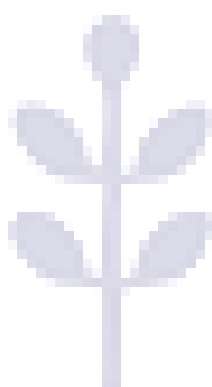
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Poor health is related to low levels of education and a lack of knowledge about disease prevention and benefit claim procedures. Other factors include geographical isolation, an inability to physically access services, low utilisation of antenatal services, mistrust of healthcare providers, a lack of information, discrimination, cultural insensitivity, financial barriers and language and communication barriers. Regarding early motherhood specifically, the Romanian report states that girls who give birth at a young age are at an increased risk of medical complications for themselves and their babies, including high maternal and infant mortality rates. The life expectancy is also lower within Roma people compared to the general population in Greece, Portugal and Romania, according to the FRA Roma Survey Report. In Portugal Roma women live less 10 years than non-Roma women (9.7 years in Greece and 8.6 years in Romania).

### High unemployment

---

Roma people have much higher unemployment rates than the general population. They also face significant barriers to accessing the formal labour market, primarily due to low levels of education and professional qualifications, and limited work experience. As the Romania report states, low educational levels limit girls' access to education and, consequently, employment opportunities and economic independence. According to a IPSOS survey, the Roma community was the second largest ethnic group (after the Traveller community) that most people believed would face disadvantage when applying for a job in Ireland.



### III. Listening Roma people – Field work research with Roma women on early marriage and early motherhood

In addition to the legal and policy framework, this report presents findings gathered directly from Roma women through interviews conducted across all four countries. The primary aim of these interviews was to gain insight into the practices of early marriage and motherhood within Roma communities, as set out in the project proposal.

This approach provided valuable insights into the consequences of these practices in relation to various aspects of women's lives in different countries. It also enabled a comparative perspective, which is presented in this report.

#### III. 1. Characterisation of the participants in the interviews

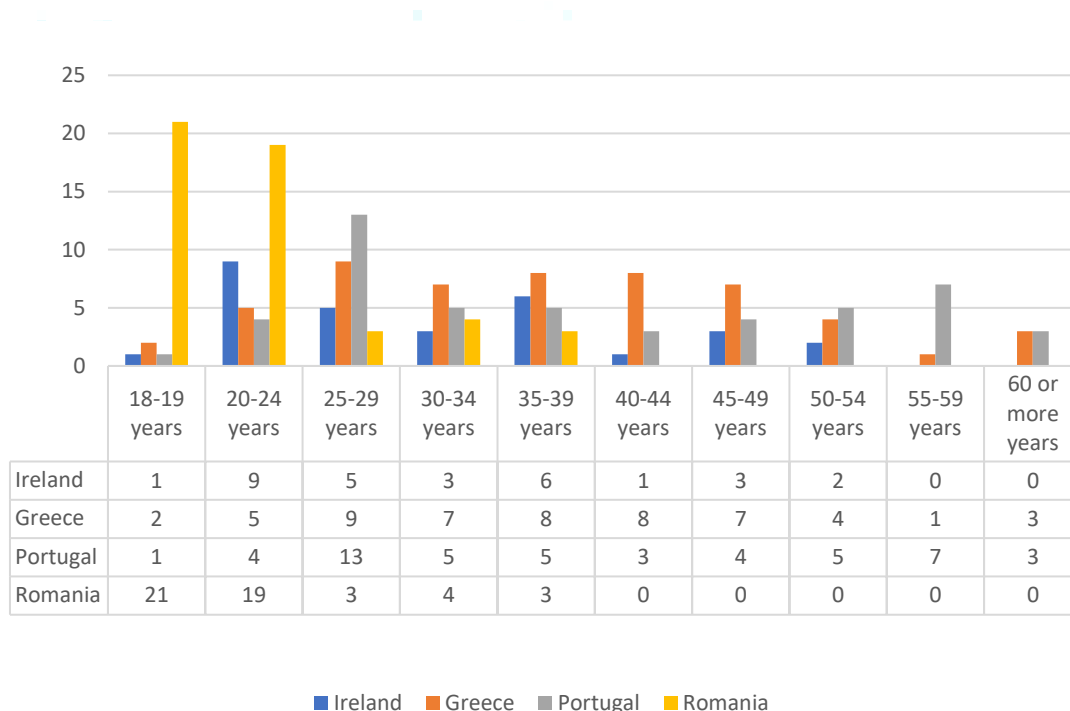
A total of 184 interviews were conducted with Roma women in all four countries involved in the ERASMUS+ project. The distribution of interviews was not equal between all partners. The reasons for this uneven distribution were related to the size of the Roma population in each country and how easy it was to access potential interviewees. The distribution of interviews by country is shown in the table below.

**Table 4 - Number of interviews conducted by country**

|          |     |
|----------|-----|
| Ireland  | 30  |
| Greece   | 54  |
| Portugal | 50  |
| Romania  | 50  |
| Total    | 184 |

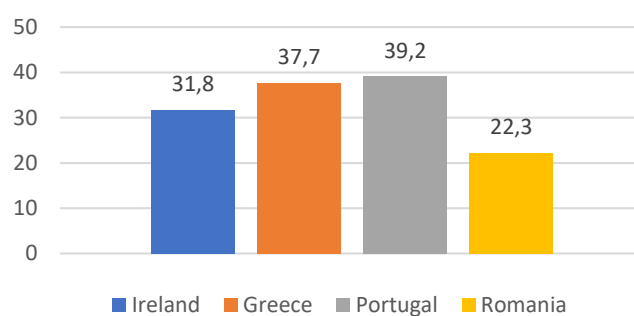
In terms of the age of the Roma women interviewed, Romania had the youngest women of all the partner countries. The number of women aged up to 24 in Romania was much higher than in the other countries, particularly in the 18–19 age group. Conversely, Portugal had the oldest Roma woman interviewed, with 15 women aged over 50.

**Figure 1 - Age group of the Roma women interviewed (Absolut numbers)**



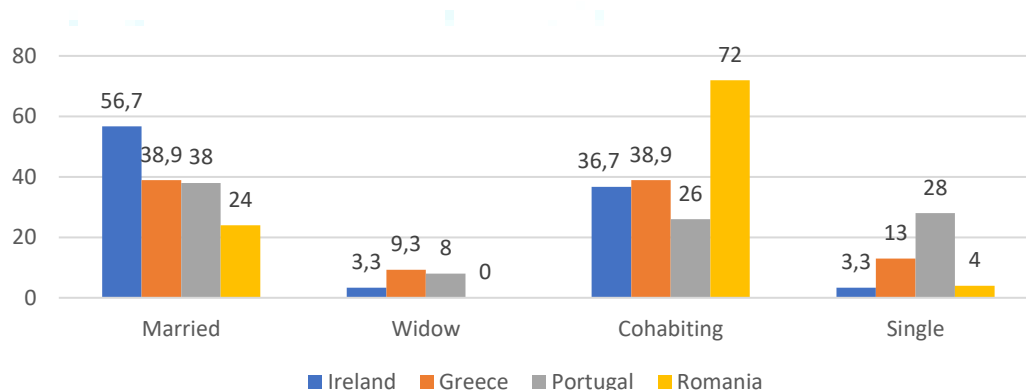
The average age of women ranges from 39.2 years in Portugal to 22.3 years in Romania.

**Figure 2 - Average age of Roma women interviewed, by country**



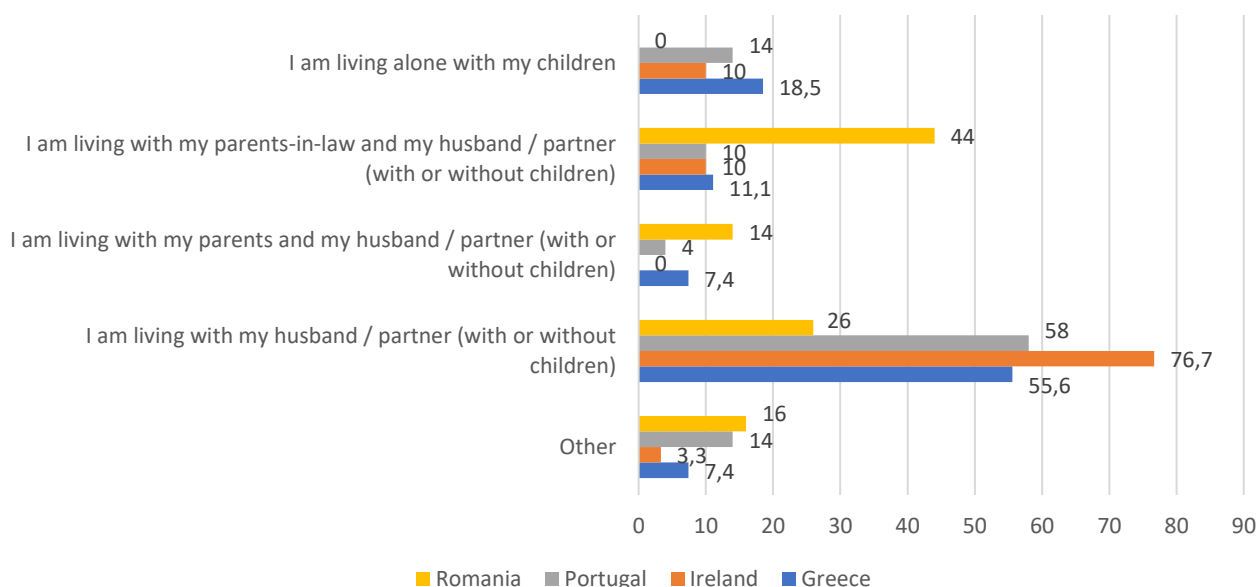
Regarding marital status, most Roma women are either married or cohabiting with their partners. Cohabitation is more prevalent in Romania, while marriage is more common in Ireland. In all countries, the number of widowed women is small. Portugal stands out as a country with a high percentage of single women.

**Figure 3 - Marital status of the Roma women interviewed, by country (%)**



From the point of view of family composition, the majority of women in almost all countries live with their husbands or partners (with or without children), accounting for 51.6% of cases. This percentage is highest in Ireland (76.7%). Conversely, the highest percentage of women living with their husbands/partners as well as their parents-in-law is found in Romania (44%). This is likely related to the age of the interviewees, who are more likely to still be living with their own or their husband's relatives. Greece, on the other hand, has the highest percentage of women living alone with their children (18.5%).

**Figure 4 – With who live Roma women interviewed, by country (%)**



Regarding their living areas, almost 68% of all interviewees live in urban areas. Almost all the women living in urban but isolated areas are also from Greece (11 women in a

total of 12). Rural areas are more referred by Romanian (50%) and Ireland (36.7%) woman.

**Table 5 – Living areas of Roma woman interviewees, by country**

|          | Urban |      | Urban but isolated |      | Rural |      | Rural but isolated |      |
|----------|-------|------|--------------------|------|-------|------|--------------------|------|
|          | %     | a.n. | %                  | a.n. | %     | a.n. | %                  | a.n. |
| Ireland  | 50    | 15   | 3.3                | 1    | 36.7  | 11   | 3.3                | 2    |
| Greece   | 64.8  | 35   | 20.4               | 11   | 1.9   | 1    | 13                 | 7    |
| Portugal | 80    | 40   | -                  | -    | 20    | 10   | -                  | -    |
| Romania  | 50    | 25   | -                  | -    | 50    | 25   | -                  | -    |
| Total    | 62.5  | 115  | 6.5                | 12   | 25.5  | 47   | 4.9                | 9    |

Note: Ireland registered a 'non-response'.

Concerning housing conditions, in general most of the Roma women (59%) live in highly deprived house and/or area. This is particularly expressed by the Greek (92.6%) and the Portuguese (76.6%) partners. In Romania besides these some condition (34%), a substantial part of the interviewed women (40%) live in precarious conditions. In Ireland most of these Roma women live in overcrowded houses (55.6%) but 37% refer living in good housing conditions, being along with Portugal (6.4%) the two countries that refer this specific situation.

Regarding housing typology, social housing is the most referred type by the women respondents in Portugal (78%) and Ireland (63.3%)<sup>5</sup>. In Greece, the majority of Roma women interviewed (68.5%) live in precarious conditions in shanty towns, slums or degraded settlements. However, this is also the country with the highest percentage of women living in apartments or houses outside of social housing, in conditions similar to those of the general population (31.5%).

Romania shows a greater distribution among the different types of housing. A total of 44% live in precarious housing, while 36% live in social housing neighbourhoods. Notably, seven women in Ireland live in emergency accommodation, making it the only

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on responses from participants in this specific study and should not be taken as representative of the entire Roma population in Ireland.

country to report this situation. Although it is not possible to confirm through the information gathered from the Roma women interviewed, based on background information, it is important to highlight that many of the women interviewed in Ireland have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives in the country.

It is also important to emphasise that many Roma women in Ireland are not native Irish and are, in fact, migrants, primarily from Romania or other EU countries. This sets the Irish context apart from the other partner countries, where Roma participants are usually citizens of the state in which they reside, and adds an extra layer of complexity to their experiences.

**Table 6 – Type of housing of the Roma woman interviewees, by partner and country**

|          | Apartment / house in social housing neighbourhood |      | Apartment / house (not social housing) in similar conditions to the general population (rented or having the ownership) |      | Precarious house in shanty town / Slum / Degraded settlements |      | Emergency accommodation |      |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------------|------|
|          | %                                                 | a.n. | %                                                                                                                       | a.n. | %                                                             | a.n. | %                       | a.n. |
| Ireland  | 63.3                                              | 19   | 13.3                                                                                                                    | 4    | 0                                                             | 0    | 23.3                    | 7    |
| Greece   | 0                                                 | 0    | 31.5                                                                                                                    | 17   | 68.5                                                          | 37   | 0                       | 0    |
| Portugal | 78.0                                              | 39   | 20                                                                                                                      | 10   | 2.0                                                           | 1    | 0                       | 0    |
| Romania  | 36.0                                              | 18   | 20.0                                                                                                                    | 10   | 44.0                                                          | 22   | 0                       | 0    |
| Total    | 46.7                                              | 86   | 16.8                                                                                                                    | 41   | 32.6                                                          | 60   | 3.8                     | 7    |

### III. 2. What women say about (early) marriage<sup>6</sup>

As already mentioned most Roma women are either married or cohabiting with their partners.

In terms of how marriages (or unions) took place and were celebrated, 63% of respondents said that their marriage or union was celebrated in accordance with Roma tradition. This figure demonstrates the important role that traditions play in these communities, particularly with regard to marriage, which is not merely considered a union between individuals, but is also deeply embedded in the social fabric and involves arrangements that align with community norms.

Traditional marriage is particularly evident in Greece (77%) and Ireland (72%). In Portugal and Romania, although a higher percentage of women married under these circumstances (58% and 48%, respectively), a significant proportion also said that this was not the case. In all four countries, the majority of Roma respondents reported neither a religious ceremony nor civil registration.

In addition, almost all women are or have been in a typically endogamous union with a Roma man, which tends to preserve cultural continuity and reinforce group identity.

In Greece and Ireland, it is clear that most marriages were the result of family arrangements, accounting for 57% and 59% of cases, respectively, followed by 'I knew him from childhood'.

In Portugal, family arrangements are still an important reason (25%), but other circumstances arise, as they do in Romania, where family arrangements account for the lowest percentage (8%). However, the importance of family and close relations (friends, family events, weddings and neighbourhood connections) is evident in each case, and these are fundamental to finding a husband.

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<sup>6</sup> Only responses from married (including widows) or in cohabitation women, i.e. 160, are included in this section.

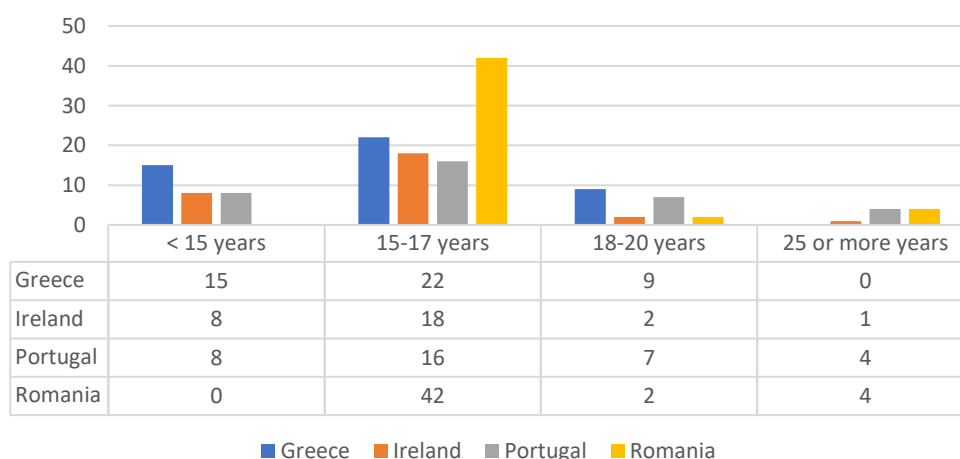
**Table 7 – Where Roma woman interviewees met their husbands/partner, by country**

|                                     | Greece |      | Ireland |      | Portugal |      | Romania |      |
|-------------------------------------|--------|------|---------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|                                     | N      | %    | N       | %    | N        | %    | N       | %    |
| It was a family arrangement         | 27     | 57.4 | 17      | 58.6 | 9        | 25   | 4       | 8.3  |
| I knew him from my childhood        | 7      | 14.9 | 6       | 20.7 | 9        | 25   | 4       | 25   |
| I met him at someone else's wedding | 3      | 6.4  | 0       | 0    | 2        | 5.6  | 4       | 8.3  |
| I met him at school                 | 3      | 6.4  | 0       | 0    | 2        | 5.6  | 6       | 12.5 |
| Through social networks             | 2      | 4.3  | 1       | 3.4  | 2        | 5.6  | 1       | 2.1  |
| I met him through friends           | 0      | 0    | 2       | 6.9  | 3        | 8.3  | 4       | 8.3  |
| I met him through family            | 1      | 2.1  | 0       | 0    | 2        | 5.6  | 7       | 14.6 |
| Live in the same neighbourhood      | 1      | 2.1  | 2       | 6.9  | 1        | 2.8  | 4       | 8.3  |
| I met him in a party/family reunion | 1      | 2.1  | 0       | 0    | 0        | 0    | 2       | 4.2  |
| I'd rather not answer               | 0      | 0    | 0       | 0    | 0        | 0    | 1       | 2.1  |
| Other                               | 1      | 4.3  | 1       | 3.4  | 6        | 16.7 | 3       | 6.3  |

Note: The six 'other' situations in Portugal are very disperse situations.

Most of the Roma women interviewed had married or entered into a partnership while they were minors, regardless of the country. Greece emerges as the country with the highest number of women interviewed who married under the age of 15 (15 women). Ireland and Portugal both had eight respondents in the same circumstances, while Romania had none. However, the age group between 15 and 17 is the one with the highest number of women who married at that age, especially on Romania.

**Figure 5 - Age of marriage/start of cohabitation, by country (Absolut numbers)**



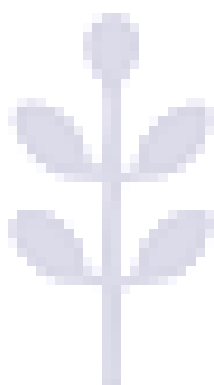
This information shows that there is a tendency towards early marriage in these populations, regardless of country of origin. For women in particular, marriage is perceived as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood in a world where childhood is short and adolescence is almost non-existent. This early transition into married life is often associated with notions of honour and purity, with virginity at the time of marriage being highly valued (Magano, 2022).<sup>7</sup>

From a young age, girls are socialised with the expectation of early marriage. Therefore, it is not surprising that women's willingness is the main reason given for marriage or cohabitation, particularly in Portugal (83%) and Ireland (76%).

However, as well as self-will, there is also the realisation that pressure is exerted by the families for the marriage to take place. This perspective is evident in Ireland.

Another important reason is that the young age at which marriage takes place is considered normal in Roma communities. This not only legitimises early marriages but also suggests that free will can be constrained by such a norm. This was particularly mentioned in Ireland (90%) and also in Portugal (53%).

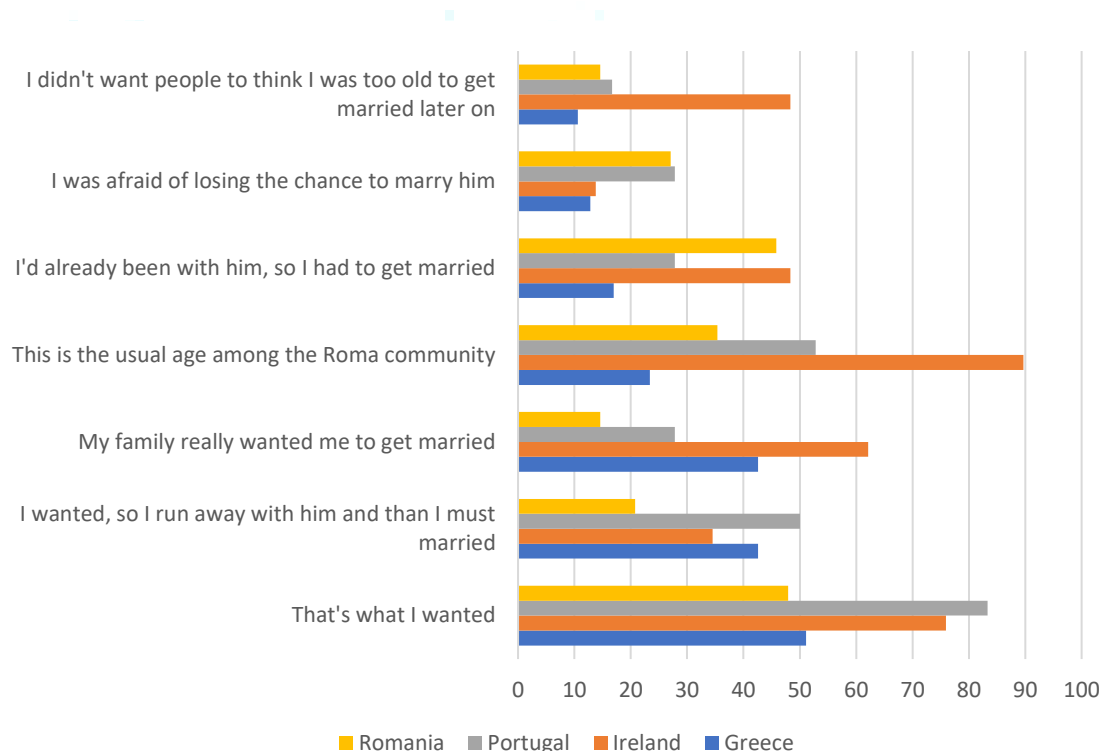
The existence of pre-marital relationships was also mentioned as a reason for getting married, particularly in Ireland and Romania. Marriage was also mentioned in relation to situations of running away by half of the Roma women in Portugal. Taking into consideration what has been learned from working with Roma communities, in this country it is sometimes the case that running away to get married is a new way of escaping the expenses (and performance requirements) of a traditional marriage.



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<sup>7</sup> Magano, O. (2022). Emancipation Life Paths of Portuguese Cigano/Roma Women. *Social Sciences*, 11(6), 237.

Figure 6 - Reasons for marrying at this age, by country (%)<sup>8</sup>



Getting married at a young age is still common in Romani communities, and many women have said that they wanted to get married early in life. However, when asked about this, over half of the women surveyed in the four countries said that they would prefer to wait a little longer.

In all countries except Portugal, more than 60% of women hold this opinion. However, there is still some women who would get married at the same age if they went back. This group is particularly evident in Portugal, where 42% of women would get married at the same age.

The families of these women reacted differently to their marriages.

In general, it can be said that the marriage of their daughters was met with mostly positive reactions – joy and happiness were the most dominant feelings.

<sup>8</sup> Multiple answers.

Relatively more Roma women in Ireland experienced joyful reactions from their families (76%). At the other end of the scale is Romania, where only 31% (15 women) of Roma women reported this.

In Greece, Ireland and Portugal, joy is associated with the fact that the *family already knows and trusts the boy*. On the other hand, 23 Roma women (79%) in Ireland, indicated that marriage/union was expected and forms part of life in their communities.

However, the responses also revealed some concerns and inconsistencies. In fact, Romania is the country with the most unfavourable responses.

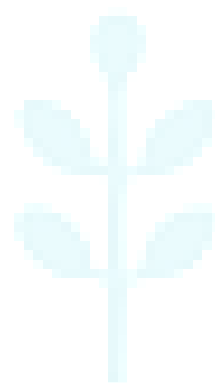
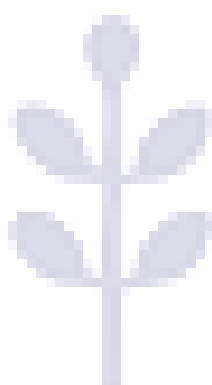
Some Roma women had referred that the first reaction of their families was of disapproval:

*'They were mad at me because they didn't choose my husband.'* Roma Woman, 24 years, Romania.

*'I didn't have family support, but I did what I felt was right for me.'* Roma Woman, 18 years, Romania.

*'It was difficult for me because my parents didn't give me the blessing.'* Roma Woman, 18 years, Romania.

Portugal stands out for the number of women who say they ran away before getting married or moving in together. In these cases, the reaction to the union was also not the best.



**Table 8 – Family reactions to marriage, by country<sup>9</sup>**

|                                                               | Greece |    | Ireland |    | Portugal |    | Romania |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----|---------|----|----------|----|---------|----|
|                                                               | N      | %  | N       | %  | N        | %  | N       | %  |
| With great joy                                                | 59.6   | 28 | 75.9    | 22 | 61.1     | 22 | 31.3    | 15 |
| They were happy they know my partner and they trust him       | 38.3   | 18 | 72.4    | 21 | 50       | 18 | 29.2    | 14 |
| Normally                                                      | 29.8   | 14 | 79.3    | 23 | 44.4     | 16 | 16.7    | 8  |
| They were concerned because I was too young                   | 23.4   | 11 | 27.6    | 8  | 36.1     | 13 | 25      | 12 |
| They were worried because I knew him in the social networks   | 4.3    | 2  | 3.4     | 1  | 2.8      | 1  | 2.1     | 1  |
| They were worried because we run away                         | 19.1   | 9  | 27.6    | 8  | 47.2     | 17 | 16.7    | 8  |
| They were worried because they don't knew him or their family | 19.1   | 9  | 24.1    | 7  | 19.4     | 7  | 14.6    | 7  |
| Other                                                         | 10.5   | 5  | 10.3    | 3  | 5.6      | 2  | 33.3    | 6  |

Note: 'Other' category is mostly related with various unfavourable reactions that don't fit into the existing categories

Prior to marriage, the majority of Roma women interviewed lived with their parents, taking care of the family and household, particularly in Greece (60%), Ireland (59%) and Romania (52%). In Portugal, 42% of interviewees were in education, the highest percentage of the four partner countries, closely followed by Ireland (41%).

Moreover, prior to marriage, there was a 19% prevalence of working Roma women in Greece, a 14% prevalence in Portugal, and a 10% prevalence in Romania.

It is not surprising that a large number of women interviewed (139 women – 87%) felt that their marriage had changed their lives. The highest percentages of women with an opposite opinion were from Greece and Romania (21% and 19%, respectively).

Opinions are not unanimous among those who mentioned changes in their lives as a result of marriage.

Portuguese Roma women (76%) particularly express a feeling of greater freedom after marriage. In Portugal, simultaneous marriage also brought feelings of respect (67%), a sense of having a voice in the community (64%), and a perception of gaining status by

<sup>9</sup> Multiple answers.

taking on the role of wife (73%). This last change is also evident among 90% Roma women living in Ireland.

Moving to live with their in-laws is a common change mostly mentioned by Greek, (59%), Portuguese (76%) and the Roma women living in Ireland (86%).

This reveals that women do not necessarily gain more freedom through marriage but lose it instead - Greece had the highest proportion of women who explicitly said this (35%). This is not only because they move in with their in-laws, but also because they have left school (66% in Ireland) and given up work (33% In Portugal; 32% in Romania).

In Romania, it is notable that 53% of women said that they started to feel pressured to have children after getting married. On the other hand, around half of the women interviewed mentioned the difficulties of married life.

*'I never imagined it would be so hard.'* Roma Woman, 18 years, Romania.

*'I was afraid I couldn't manage as a woman in the house. I wasn't ready to get married.'* Roma Woman, 24 years, Romania.

**Table 9 – Changes in life after marriage, by country<sup>10</sup>**

|                                                              | Greece |    | Ireland |    | Portugal |    | Romania |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----|---------|----|----------|----|---------|----|
|                                                              | %      | N  | %       | N  | %        | N  | %       | N  |
| It gave me more freedom                                      | 45.9   | 17 | 31      | 9  | 75.8     | 25 | 0       | 0  |
| I started to feel more respected                             | 27     | 10 | 58.6    | 17 | 66.7     | 22 | 2.6     | 1  |
| I began to feel that I had a voice in the community          | 16.2   | 6  | 34.5    | 10 | 63.6     | 22 | 0       | 0  |
| I stopped being someone's daughter and became someone's wife | 32.4   | 12 | 89.7    | 26 | 72.7     | 24 | 7.9     | 3  |
| I lost my freedom                                            | 35.1   | 13 | 51.7    | 15 | 21.2     | 7  | 18.4    | 7  |
| I couldn't go to school anymore                              | 21.6   | 8  | 65.5    | 19 | 33.3     | 11 | 26.3    | 10 |
| I couldn't go to work anymore                                | 5.4    | 2  | 24.1    | 7  | 33.3     | 11 | 31.6    | 12 |
| I moved in with my in-laws                                   | 59.5   | 22 | 86.2    | 25 | 75.8     | 25 | 18.4    | 7  |
| I started to feel the pressure to have children              | 16.2   | 6  | 24.1    | 7  | 18.2     | 6  | 52.6    | 20 |
| Other                                                        | 0      | 0  | 13.8    | 4  | 0        | 0  | 57.9    | 22 |

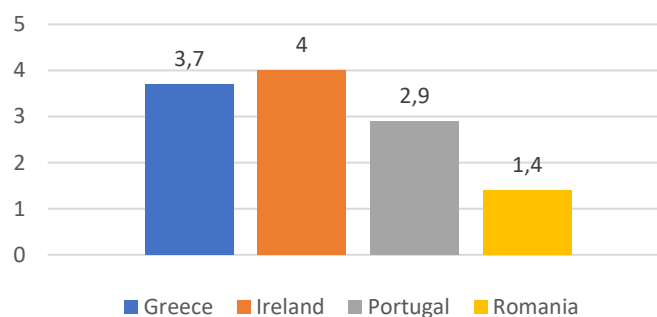
<sup>10</sup> Multiple answers.

### III. 3. Motherhood

It is common knowledge among those working with Roma communities that motherhood plays a central and deeply respected role, serving as both a cultural cornerstone and a symbol of identity and continuity. In many Roma cultures, becoming a mother is seen as an important milestone, marking a woman's full participation in community life and reinforcing her status and influence within the family structure. Through motherhood, Roma women play a role not only in raising children, but also in preserving traditions and values across generations.

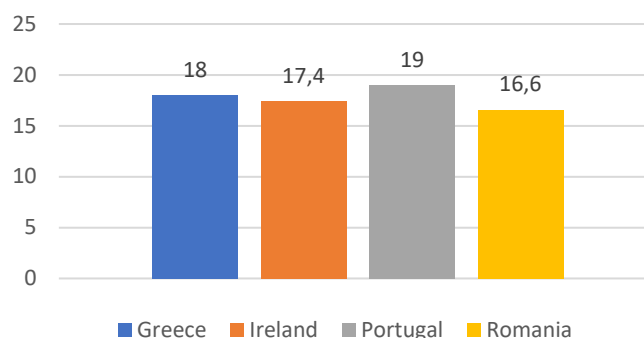
All Roma women respondents of all partners countries have children. In total the average of children per women is 2.9. Ireland has the highest average number of children per woman. In contrast, Romania has the lowest average. However, it is important to note that the people interviewed in Romania tend to be younger than those interviewed in other countries.

**Figure 7 – Average number of children per women interviewed, by country**



As mentioned above, most of these women got married and became mothers at a very young age. On average, women have their first child at the age of 17.8. Portugal has the highest average age (19), while Romania has the lowest (16.6).

**Figure 8 – Average age of the interviewed women at birth of first child, by country**



More specifically, most births generally took place before the age of 20. However, most of the Roma women interviewed had their first child as minors, and in most cases before the age of 15, with the exception of Romania. The youngest mothers, aged 13, were found among Greek, Portuguese and Roma women living in Ireland. Portuguese Roma women are the group of women who had their first child at the latest, with 14 women giving birth after the age of 21. However, the oldest woman to give birth to her first child was from Greece.

**Table 10 - Age of women at the birth of their first child, by country (Absolut numbers)**

|          | < = 15<br>years | 16-17<br>years | 18-20<br>years | 21-24<br>years | 25-28<br>years | 29-30<br>years | >= 31<br>years |
|----------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Greece   | 11              | 16             | 19             | 6              | 1              | 0              | 1              |
| Ireland  | 6               | 14             | 7              | 1              | 2              | 0              | 0              |
| Portugal | 8               | 13             | 15             | 11             | 2              | 1              | 0              |
| Romania  | 0               | 46             | 4              | 0              | 0              | 0              | 0              |

Most pregnancies were unplanned (133 women-72%). However, Portugal is the only country to buck this trend, with 60% of women reporting that their pregnancy was planned. Romania has the highest rate of unplanned pregnancies (96%).

As with their marriage age, most women would have preferred to wait longer before becoming mothers. The exception is Portugal, where most women (54%) are happy with the age at which they had their first child. Romanian women are the most likely to express a preference for waiting longer, with 80% saying so.

For those who would prefer to wait a little longer, the most common reason across all countries is related to feeling unprepared to be a mum. This was expressed by 72 women. Particularly in Ireland becoming a mother at a young age is seen as challenging and daunting for many girls, since most of them were minors at the time: *'I didn't know how to take care of my child properly, it was my husband's family who took care of my child's education.'*

Not being prepared to be a mother is a common reason, although the percentage varies from country to country.

The same happened with those who expressed a willingness to stay in education for longer. In Ireland, for example, almost 90% of respondents cited a desire to continue their education, while 78% expressed a wish to attend university. A high percentage of people in Portugal and Romania also mentioned this reason, considering education to be the area most impacted by motherhood.

The idea that motherhood means the end of childhood is also expressed by those women who say they would like more time to play, particularly in Ireland and Portugal (67% and 63% respectively): *'Firstly, girls do not have a childhood. They learn how to take care of children before they learn to read or write. We have to stop treating girls as if they are parents. They should be able to enjoy their childhood, because they basically think that they will have more freedom when they get married.'* Roma woman living in Ireland, 53 years.

Other aspect that must be highlighted is the fact that in Romania 17 (37.8%) women had referred that their children were born underweight, which represents a significant difference compared to other countries.

**Table 11 - Reasons for wanting to have children later in life, by country<sup>11</sup>**

|                                                                                                                    | Greece |      | Ireland |      | Portugal |      | Romania |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|------|---------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|                                                                                                                    | %      | a.n. | %       | a.n. | %        | a.n. | %       | a.n. |
| I wish I'd been at school longer                                                                                   | 16.2   | 6    | 88.9    | 16   | 73.7     | 14   | 57.8    | 26   |
| I wish I'd been to the university                                                                                  | 16.2   | 6    | 77.8    | 14   | 26.3     | 5    | 18.8    | 9    |
| I wish I'd had more time to play                                                                                   | 13.5   | 5    | 66.7    | 12   | 63.2     | 12   | 4.4     | 2    |
| I don't think I was ready to be a mum yet                                                                          | 59.5   | 22   | 72.2    | 13   | 57.9     | 11   | 54.2    | 26   |
| As I didn't know how to look after my child properly, it was my husband's family who managed my child's upbringing | 18.9   | 7    | 55.6    | 10   | 36.8     | 7    | 11.1    | 5    |
| I had health problems after my pregnancy                                                                           | 2.7    | 1    | 16.7    | 3    | 10.5     | 2    | 20      | 9    |
| I had mental health problems after my pregnancy                                                                    | 5.4    | 2    | 16.7    | 3    | 15.8     | 3    | 0       | 0    |
| I had told many times that I wasn't old enough to be a mum                                                         | 18.9   | 7    | 55.6    | 10   | 36.8     | 7    | 8.9     | 4    |
| The child was born premature                                                                                       | 2.7    | 1    | 11.1    | 2    | 0        | 0    | 2.2     | 1    |
| The child was born under weight                                                                                    | 0      | 0    | 22.2    | 4    | 5.3      | 1    | 37.8    | 17   |
| Other                                                                                                              | 32.4   | 12   | 11.1    | 2    | 0        | 0    | 33.3    | 15   |

Other diverse opinions were expressed, such as describing motherhood as being very demanding in terms of time and energy. This is much evident in Greece and Romania:

*'It's a lot of work: 'I was tired from work. I couldn't handle motherhood.'* Roma Woman, 71 years, Greece.

*'I was alone. I had to work a lot.'* Roma Woman, 40 years, Greece.

*'It was overwhelming at first. I didn't know what to expect.'* Roma Woman, 24 years, Romania.

*'Being a mum is beautiful, but it's also exhausting.'* Roma Woman, 18 years Romania.

<sup>11</sup> Multiple answers.

Traditionally, in Roma communities, the birth of a child is not just a private family affair, but a communal event that strengthens social bonds.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, a child's birth is a great event, and the reaction of the families is, in general, very positive. This idea is reflected in most opinions of the Roma women in all countries, except Romania. In fact, Romania is the country with the lowest percentage of women (30%) who describe a 'great joy' as their family's reaction to their pregnancies. In Ireland, almost all families react normally (93.3% - 28) to pregnancy because it is expected when a girl gets married or starts living with her partner. It is the next natural step.

Another aspect mentioned by Roma women as a positive fact is the help they have received in this new stage of their lives, namely with regard to Roma women living in Ireland, Portuguese and Romanian Roma women, although in the latter case on a smaller scale. The fact that a significant number of women live with family members, especially with their husband's family, makes it possible for these women to receive some help in this demanding phase of their lives.

However, in the Romanian case, according to the majority of Roma women's opinions, families' reactions were most closely related to feelings of concern. These concerns were related to the women's age at the time of their pregnancies (38% - 19), their health (32% - 16), and how to manage the pregnancy and their lives after giving birth. Bad reactions were also included in the 'other' category.

Some examples are presented below:

*'They were worried that we couldn't handle the money.'* Roma Woman, 20 years, Romania.

*'They were worried we couldn't manage with the children.'* Roma Woman, 31 years, Romania.

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<sup>12</sup> See: Rozvitok Human Rights Foundation. (2017). *Romani Customs and Traditions: Birth*. Retrieved from <https://rozvitok.org/en/romani-customs-and-traditions-birth/>.

**Table 12 - Reaction of the family to the pregnancy, by country (%)<sup>13</sup>**

|                                             | Greece |      | Ireland |      | Portugal |      | Romania |      |
|---------------------------------------------|--------|------|---------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|                                             | %      | a.n. | %       | a.n. | %        | a.n. | %       | a.n. |
| With great joy                              | 79.6   | 43   | 80      | 24   | 94       | 47   | 30      | 15   |
| Normally                                    | 35.2   | 19   | 93.3    | 28   | 46       | 23   | 12      | 6    |
| They were concerned because I was too young | 18.5   | 10   | 26.7    | 8    | 24       | 12   | 38      | 19   |
| They were concerned because if my health    | 14.8   | 8    | 26.7    | 8    | 24       | 12   | 32      | 16   |
| They offered me their help                  | 20.4   | 11   | 83.3    | 25   | 82       | 41   | 40      | 20   |
| Other                                       | 5.6    | 3    | 20      | 6    | 2        | 1    | 48      | 24   |

The period following childbirth, known as the postpartum period, is a profound time of change for new mothers—physically, emotionally, and mentally. While it's filled with joy it also comes with challenges. Family support during this time is not just helpful; it's often essential for the well-being of both the mother and the baby.

In this sense, 146 Roma women (79%) from all four countries said having received help after giving birth their first child. Three countries presented percentages of 80% or more regarding this aspect. In Romania, however, it is important referred that 34% (17) of respondents did not receive any help.

For those who received help in this specific phase of their lives, there are some differences when it comes to who helped. In Ireland (88% - 21), Portugal (80% - 35) and Greece (76% - 34), the husband/partner was the principal help provider. This could mean a change in behaviour and a greater assumption by men of their responsibilities as fathers.

The respondents' own mothers also provided important support, particularly for Greek (76%, or 34 women) and Romanian (79%, or 11 women) women.

The husbands' families were referred to especially by Greek (62%, 28) and Roma women living in Ireland (63%, 15).

<sup>13</sup> Multiple answers.

### III. 4. Became a mother - feelings changes

For the women interviewed, motherhood was largely described as a joy, with the majority (164 women, or 89%) expressing this view. High percentages were present in all countries, with Portugal and Greece standing out with figures above 90%. However, it is a joy that also brings responsibilities, as expressed in all countries.

Indeed, there is also an awareness that motherhood can be stressful, demanding and exhausting. Women from Ireland and Portugal are the most likely to express tiredness, but it was the Portuguese who were most likely to say that motherhood is physically demanding (70% - 35). It was also the Roma Portuguese women who said they felt very afraid of this new reality: *'I never thought it would be like this that it would be so demanding. I was always tired and afraid of not knowing what to do.'* (Portuguese Roma woman, 24 years).

Motherhood has also brought a feeling of greater respect from family members and the community in general. This feeling has been particularly expressed by women from Ireland and Portugal. However, this feeling is not expressed much by Romanian women.

**Table 13 - What it was like to become a mother, by country (%)<sup>14</sup>**

|                                              | Greece |      | Ireland |      | Portugal |      | Romania |      |
|----------------------------------------------|--------|------|---------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|                                              | %      | a.n. | %       | a.n. | %        | a.n. | %       | a.n. |
| It was a joy                                 | 94.4   | 51   | 86.7    | 26   | 98       | 49   | 76      | 38   |
| It was a great responsibility                | 66.7   | 36   | 100     | 30   | 90       | 45   | 80      | 40   |
| It was very tiring                           | 40.7   | 22   | 63.3    | 19   | 62       | 31   | 48      | 24   |
| I was physically very demanding              | 27.8   | 15   | 26.7    | 8    | 70       | 35   | 38      | 19   |
| I was very much afraid                       | 31.5   | 17   | 40      | 12   | 66       | 33   | 32      | 16   |
| I felt more respected by my family           | 18.5   | 10   | 56.7    | 17   | 68       | 34   | 14      | 7    |
| I felt more respected by my husband's family | 16.7   | 9    | 60      | 18   | 64       | 32   | 22      | 11   |
| I felt more respected by my community        | 18.5   | 10   | 33.3    | 10   | 66       | 33   | 12      | 6    |
| Other                                        | 5.6    | 3    | 16.7    | 5    | 4        | 2    | 34      | 17   |

<sup>14</sup> Multiple answers.

But as expected, becoming a mother brings many changes and new routines to the lives of couples, but especially to the lives of mothers. Many adjustments had to be made in the family with the arrival of a baby.

A total of 175 of the 184 Roma women interviewed (95%) expressed this view of change when asked about their lives after becoming mothers.

Changes are diverse and not equal in every partner country. One issue that emerged was the impact on relationships. In Ireland, for example, there has been a significant improvement in couples' relationships (86.2% - 25). Greece (50% - 25) and Portugal (58.7% - 27) also have a substantial proportion of women who share this opinion, albeit to a lesser extent. This opinion is not shared by respondents from Romania, where only three women held this view. In fact, Romanian women are the ones who most often report the opposite, meaning a deterioration in their relationships with their husbands/partners (34% - 17).

In addition to improvements in personal relationships, some women also reported feeling more respected after becoming mothers. This was particularly evident among Portuguese (69.6% - 32) and the Roma women living in Ireland (51.7% - 15). Some Portuguese women also mentioned that they began to feel that they had a voice in the community. Again, the Romanian women had a different opinion and only four of them felt that respect and none felt that motherhood had any impact on their communities.

Negative views of the changes experienced after becoming a mother were also expressed. Having less time for oneself was one of the most frequently cited issues in Ireland (93%) and Portugal (67%). Related to this are the loss of personal freedom, which was mentioned in Ireland, Portugal and Greece, albeit to a lesser extent, and the inability to attend school or work, which was reported in Portugal, Ireland and Romania.

Table 14 – Changes in life after motherhood, by country (%)<sup>15</sup>

|                                                     | Greece |      | Ireland |      | Portugal |      | Romania |      |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------|------|---------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|                                                     | %      | a.n. | %       | a.n. | %        | a.n. | %       | a.n. |
| It gave me more freedom                             | 30     | 15   | 13.8    | 4    | 32.6     | 15   | 0       | 0    |
| I started to feel more respected                    | 44     | 22   | 51.7    | 15   | 69.6     | 32   | 8.2     | 4    |
| I began to feel that I had a voice in the community | 20     | 10   | 34.5    | 10   | 63       | 29   | 0       | 0    |
| Relations with my husband have improved             | 50     | 25   | 86.2    | 25   | 58.7     | 27   | 6.1     | 3    |
| Relations with my husband have deteriorated         | 10     | 5    | 13.8    | 4    | 19.6     | 9    | 34.7    | 17   |
| I lost my freedom                                   | 32     | 16   | 62.1    | 18   | 47.8     | 22   | 16.3    | 8    |
| I couldn't go to school anymore                     | 14     | 7    | 72.4    | 21   | 32.6     | 15   | 36.7    | 18   |
| I couldn't go to work anymore                       | 18     | 9    | 37.9    | 11   | 41.3     | 19   | 26.5    | 13   |
| I no longer have time for myself                    | 28     | 14   | 93.1    | 27   | 67.4     | 31   | 38.8    | 19   |
| Other                                               | 20     | 10   | 13.8    | 4    | 2.2      | 1    | 55.1    | 27   |

It is important to give some 'space' to the opinions of Romanian women, who were much less likely to mention positive appreciations as a result of becoming a mother. In the 'other' category, respondents had the opportunity to express in a personal way the changes they felt in the first person:

*'It's amazing but also challenging. Watching my child grow is a blessing.'* Roma Woman, 20 years, Romania.

*'I felt more pressure in everything I was doing for my family as a wife and mother.'* Roma Woman, 23 years, Romania.

*'I felt a lot of deprivation.'* Roma Woman, 22 years, Romania.

*'Responsibilities have multiplied; it's not just about me anymore.'* Roma Woman, 24 years, Romania.

*'I felt how hard it is to be a parent, when you have nothing to clothe and feed your child.'* Roma Woman, 23 years, Romania.

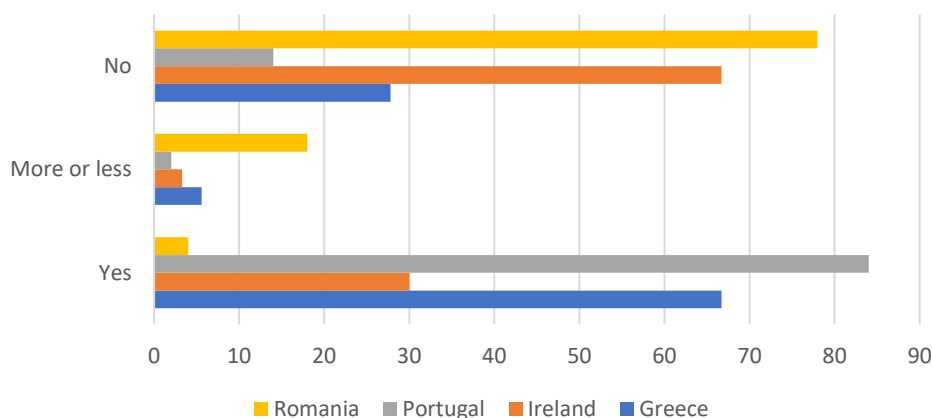
<sup>15</sup> Multiple answers.

### III. 5. The relevance of information

Becoming a mother doesn't necessarily mean having all the information needed to manage this event in the best possible way, considering the wellbeing of both mother and child.

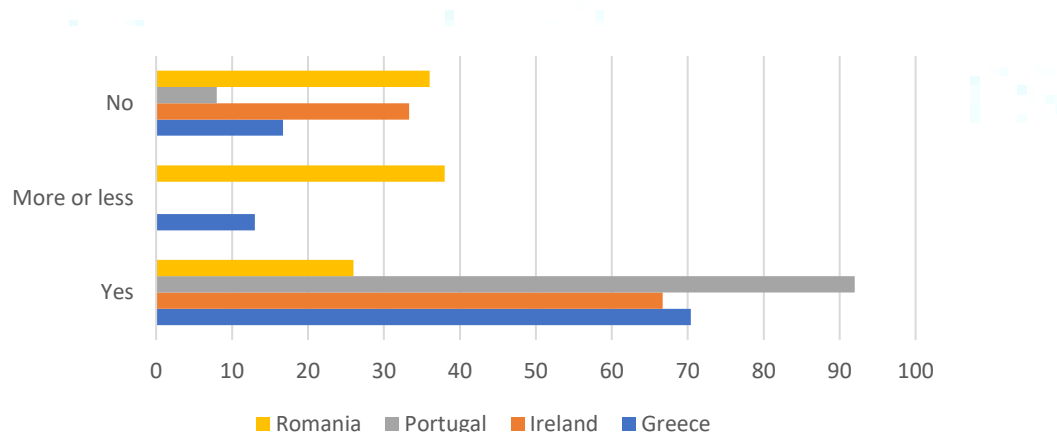
There are two distinct positions on this subject. On the one hand, there are women who say they have adequate information about pregnancy. These women are from Greece (67% - 36) and Portugal (84% - 42). On the other hand, there are women who say they do not have adequate information. These women are from Ireland (67% - 20) and Romania (78% - 39).

Figure 9 – Adequate information about pregnancy, by country (%)



However, with the exception the Romanian Roma women respondents felt that they had the necessary information to care for a child. This may seem contradictory to the above sentence, however learning how to care for a child is something you observe within the family and learn through experience, which is the type of learning most valued by Roma people. A phrase from one of the Roma women living in Ireland who were interviewed illustrates this idea well: *'The education provided by the family is the most important thing, especially the relationship between mother and daughter. This problem can only be improved by starting with home education.'* Roma woman living in Ireland, 36 years.

Figure 10 – Adequate information about having a child to care, by country (%)



According to the European Perinatal Health Report 2015-2019, published by the Euro-Peristat<sup>16</sup> network, the majority of pregnant women in Europe have access to medical care during pregnancy. More than 90% of women have at least one antenatal appointment. The majority have 7 or more consultations during pregnancy, in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations and national guidelines. The first consultation usually takes place in the first trimester of pregnancy. For those women that did not attend antenatal appointments, it can cause problems for both the baby and the mother.

Of the Roma women interviewed, the highest percentages of those who attend hospital/medical appointments to follow the pregnancy were found in Greece (91% - 49) and Portugal (92% - 46). In Ireland and Romania, those values are much lower at 53% (16) and 50% (25) respectively.

For those who reported not attending hospital or medical appointments before giving birth, the reasons differ between Ireland (14%) and Romania (25%). For Roma women living in Ireland, the main challenges were related to language barriers and difficulty in understanding important information or communication. Among Romanian women, 76% cited the fear of having to pay fees as the main difficulty. They also did not know how to get there (60%, or 15 women), and/or felt ashamed (56%, or 14 women).

<sup>16</sup> Euro-Peristat Project (2022). European Perinatal Health Report: Core indicators of the health and care of pregnant women and babies in Europe from 2015 to 2019.

**Table 15 – Reasons for not attending hospital/medical appointments, by country (%)<sup>17</sup>**

|                                                               | Ireland |   | Romania |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---|---------|----|
|                                                               | %       | N | %       | N  |
| I didn't know how to go                                       | 21.4    | 3 | 60      | 15 |
| I didn't know how that was important                          | 50      | 7 | 24      | 6  |
| My family said it wasn't worth it                             | 7.1     | 1 | 0       | 0  |
| There was no one to accompany me                              | 21.4    | 3 | 36      | 9  |
| I was fear of paying fees                                     | 28.6    | 4 | 76      | 19 |
| I have difficulties to express myself in the country language | 57.1    | 8 | 0       | 0  |
| I have trouble understanding what the doctors say             | 57.1    | 8 | 12      | 3  |
| I was ashamed                                                 | 14.3    | 2 | 56      | 14 |
| Other                                                         | 42.9    | 6 | 40      | 10 |

The situation is reversed regarding antenatal classes: the number of women who did not take part in these sessions is quite high, meaning that the majority did not prepare for childbirth. The number of women attending antenatal classes in Portugal is the highest (16).

Among the subgroup of women who did not attend antenatal classes (157), the most important reasons given in the four countries were related to not knowing how to get there and/or the importance of antenatal care for their health.

In Portugal, the fear that people would think they could not take care of their babies (30% - 7), the lack of family support (26% - 6) and feelings of shame (17% -4) were also mentioned.

In Ireland, in particular, the difficulty of expressing oneself in the country's language was emphasised. Being migrants brings specific challenges, including language barriers as well as unfamiliarity with the Irish healthcare system. These factors need to be acknowledged as they significantly impact access to services and support.

<sup>17</sup> Multiple answers. In this table were only considered the responses of Ireland and Romania. In Greece and Portugal, there were only 5 and 4 answers, respectively, and which did not justify the representation in the table.

**Table 16 – Reasons for not attending antenatal classes before giving birth, by country (%)<sup>18</sup>**

|                                                                    | Greece |    | Ireland |    | Portugal |    | Romania |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----|---------|----|----------|----|---------|----|
|                                                                    | %      | N. | %       | N. | %        | N. | %       | N  |
| I didn't know how to go                                            | 23.4   | 11 | 28      | 7  | 73.9     | 17 | 54.3    | 25 |
| I didn't know how that was important                               | 40.4   | 19 | 36      | 9  | 69.6     | 16 | 32.6    | 15 |
| My family said it wasn't worth it                                  | 6.4    | 3  | 4       | 1  | 26.1     | 6  | 2.2     | 1  |
| There was no one to accompany me                                   | 4.3    | 2  | 8       | 2  | 34.8     | 8  | 8.7     | 4  |
| I was fear of paying fees                                          | 2.1    | 1  | 8       | 2  | 8.7      | 2  | 6.5     | 3  |
| I have difficulties to express myself in the country language      | 0      | 0  | 36      | 9  | 0        | 0  | 0       | 0  |
| I have trouble understanding what the doctors say                  | 4.3    | 2  | 32      | 8  | 13       | 3  | 0       | 0  |
| I was ashamed                                                      | 2.1    | 1  | 0       | 0  | 17.4     | 4  | 4.3     | 2  |
| I was afraid they'd think I didn't know how to look after the baby | 2.1    | 1  | 8       | 2  | 30.4     | 7  | 6.5     | 3  |
| Other                                                              | 57.4   | 27 | 76      | 25 | 17.4     | 4  | 67.4    | 31 |

But the most important reason in Greece, Ireland and Romania was that these women were unaware of these classes because nobody told them about them. Among Roma women living in Ireland, language once again emerges as a key barrier to accessing prenatal classes. In some cases, these types of sessions did not even exist at that time. Moreover, it was not a common occurrence among Roma women. Some testimonies are presented below.

*'There weren't that many programs back then.'* Roma Woman 42 years, Greece.

*'At that time, it wasn't normal, I didn't know it existed.'* Roma Woman, 32 years, Ireland.

*'I didn't know about these courses, I think they would have been good.'* Roma Woman, 20 years, Romania.

*'In my community, pregnant women don't usually attend such classes.'* Roma Woman, 18 years, Romania.

<sup>18</sup> Multiple answers.

These results are in line with studies that had highlighted that Roma women tend to have fewer antenatal visits.<sup>19</sup>

Another important issue related to motherhood that affects some women is postnatal depression. Of the Roma women interviewed, 115 had heard of this condition. Romanian Roma women had the highest percentage (68%) of those who had not heard about postnatal depression.

Of the 57 women who had heard of postnatal depression, a higher percentage of Greek and Portuguese Roma women knew someone who had suffered from it.

By contrast, over 80% of Roma women living in Ireland, do not know anyone who has had this experience. Romanian Roma women present an unclear situation on this matter, with similar percentages giving different answers.

Among the group of 57 women, Greek and Portuguese women were the most likely to say that they had suffered from this condition when asked about their own situation.

Of the women who consider themselves to have suffered from postnatal depression, 12 did not receive any help: seven in Greece, two in Ireland and three in Portugal.

The most common reasons for not seeking help were: not knowing how to access it; not knowing what was wrong with them; their families not thinking it was worth it; and/or being afraid to express their feelings.

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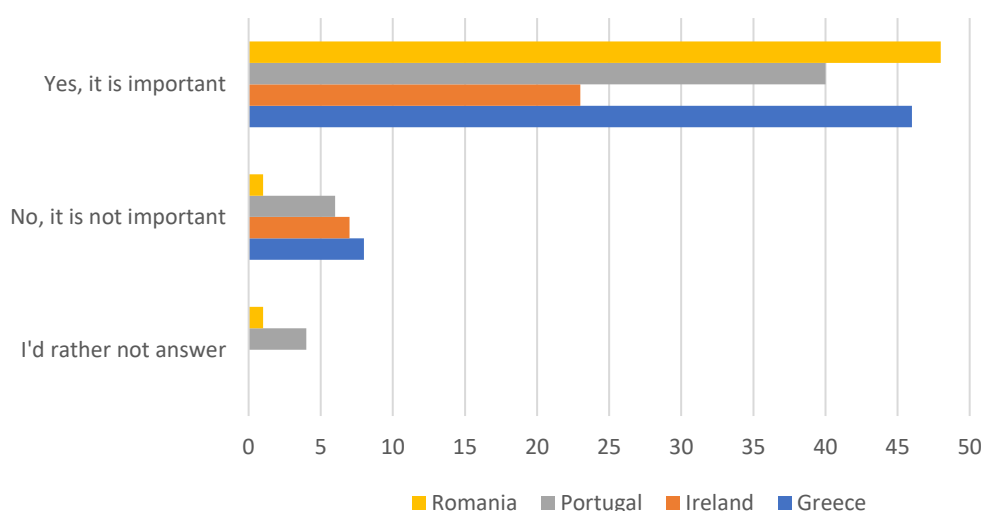
<sup>19</sup> For example: BMC Women's Health. (2015). *Standpoints of Roma women regarding reproductive health*. Retrieved from: <https://bmcmwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-015-0195-0> or UCD IRIS Centre, National Quality and Patient Safety Directorate, and National Women and Infants Health Programme (2024) *Capturing Roma Women's Experiences and Perspectives of the Quality and Safety of Maternity Care: Co-Designing an Engagement Strategy (Poster)*.: [https://cairde.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NPSO-POSTER-2024\\_V7-1.pdf?gl=1\\*yreb33\\*up\\*MQ.\\*ga\\*ODgzNDg4ODkxLjE3MzQ2MjY5MjQ.\\*ga\\_CW137LCRG8\\*MTczNDYyNjkyMy4xLjAuMTczNDYyNjkyMy4wLjAuMA](https://cairde.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NPSO-POSTER-2024_V7-1.pdf?gl=1*yreb33*up*MQ.*ga*ODgzNDg4ODkxLjE3MzQ2MjY5MjQ.*ga_CW137LCRG8*MTczNDYyNjkyMy4xLjAuMTczNDYyNjkyMy4wLjAuMA)

### III. 6. Preventing early marriage and early motherhood

Given the importance of the issue of early marriage and motherhood and how it can affect the lives of young Roma women, not only physically but also in terms of their choices and futures, the opinions of respondents highlight the need for intervention.

Of the 184 respondents from the four countries, 85% (157) considered it important to promote activities to reduce or prevent early marriage. The figure below shows that Romanian and Greek Roma women have the highest number of favourable answers, followed by Portugal.

Figure 11 – Importance of activities to reduce or prevent early marriage (%)



The reasons given for those women who do not agree with the opinion of the majority vary from country to country. In Greece, Portugal and Ireland the main reason activities aimed at preventing early motherhood are not valued is due to the longevity and constancy of traditions: *this is something that will never change* but also with the conviction that traditions should be preserved. A Portuguese woman offers a “good” explanation for this continuity: *‘I don't think it's going to change — it's tradition! A woman who gets married at 19 or 20 is already considered old, so that's not going to change’*. (Portuguese Roma Woman, 28 years)

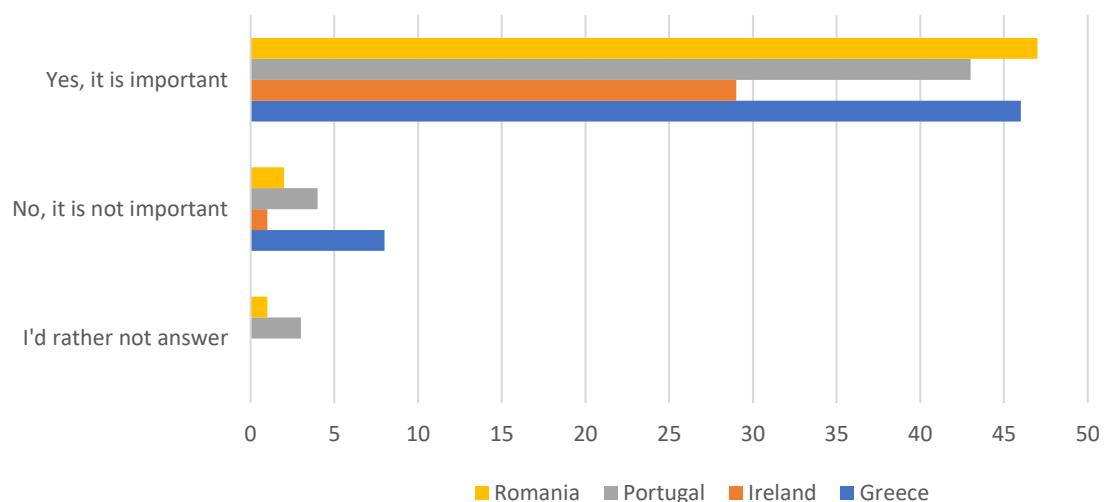
In all countries except Romania, the importance of women's 'will' was recognised (*Roma women like to marriage early*), which *also* led to the importance that marriage assumes in their lives.

**Table 17 - Reasons for not promoting activities to reduce/prevent early marriage (Absolut numbers)<sup>20</sup>**

|                                                                       | Greece | Ireland | Portugal | Romania |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| This will never change                                                | 6      | 4       | 7        | 2       |
| It is needed to preserve tradition                                    | 6      | 5       | 3        | 1       |
| It is needed to preserve the role of women                            | 3      | 6       | 3        | 0       |
| Roma women like to marriage early                                     | 5      | 6       | 5        | 1       |
| Marriage is too important in Roma girl's life                         | 6      | 7       | 5        | 2       |
| There is a strong pressure from the families for early marriage       | 1      | 2       | 3        | 0       |
| If we do not marry in an early age people star to talk badly about us | 3      | 3       | 3        | 1       |
| Other                                                                 | 1      | 2       | 3        | 0       |

Opinions on early motherhood are very similar. Once again, Romania and Greece led the way, with 165 respondents agreeing that it was important to promote activities that would reduce and/or prevent early motherhood.

**Figure 12 - Importance of activities to reduce or prevent early motherhood (%)**



<sup>20</sup> Multiple answers.

Once again, focusing on Greek women, who have the highest number of responses among the partner countries, reveals that the preservation of tradition is the main reason for not preventing early motherhood, alongside the fact that motherhood is very important in the lives of Roma girls and/or Roma women's desire to become mothers at an early age. These opinions confirm the importance of motherhood in Roma communities, but they can also pose an obstacle for change.

**Table 18 - Reasons for not promoting activities to reduce/prevent early motherhood**

(Absolut numbers)<sup>21</sup>

|                                                                                | Greece | Ireland | Portugal | Romania |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| This will never change                                                         | 5      | 0       | 1        | 0       |
| It is needed to preserve tradition                                             | 6      | 0       | 2        | 2       |
| It is needed to preserve the role of women                                     | 4      | 0       | 2        | 2       |
| Roma women like to be mothers early                                            | 5      | 0       | 2        | 2       |
| Motherhood is too important in Roma girl's life                                | 5      | 0       | 2        | 1       |
| There is a strong pressure from the families for early motherhood              | 2      | 0       | 2        | 0       |
| If we do not become mother in an early age people start to talk badly about us | 3      | 0       | 1        | 0       |
| Other                                                                          | 1      | 1       | 2        | 0       |

However, many suggestions and opinions were made by those who believe that action can be taken to prevent and reduce early marriages and pregnancies.

Some respondents, particularly in Greece and in Romania emphasised the importance of women having their own lives and experiences, particularly in the labour market, before becoming mothers. This view was expressed not only by young women, but also by older women.

*'Before they get married and have children, they must grow up, become women. To work. To feel themselves first.'* Roma Woman, 27 years, Greece.

<sup>21</sup> Multiple answers.

*'Girls must at least finish high school, have a high school diploma, and be able to find a job to comfortably raise their children.'* Roma Woman, 36 years, Greece.

*'Girls need to learn that when they become mothers, responsibilities arise. As children, they should learn to live carefree.'* Roma Woman, 32 years, Greece.

*'Girls should continue school, learn a craft. Family can wait. It will come at any age.'* Roma Woman, 26 years, Greece.

*'Girls are still children. They should not give birth. They should live their lives.'* Roma Woman, 40 years, Greece.

*'I would advise them to finish school, get a job, see what life is like and then have a family.'* Roma Woman, 62 years, Greece.

*'We have to tell them that they have to grow up. Girls are children. They don't know what love and motherhood mean. Obligations are created.'* Roma Woman, 71 years, Greece.

*'It's a waste of life, so let them know how to choose and how to enjoy life, and only then think about it.'* Roma Woman, 43 years, Portugal.

*'To prevent it! Get to know each other first, give it time, and then become parents.'* Roma Woman, 37 years, Portugal.

In parallel, the importance of education and the right to a childhood as a child is clear:

*'Girls are still children. They must not get married.'* Roma Woman, 32 years, Greece.

*'Continue studying so that when you have children you are prepared to offer them a good education and be able to offer them better opportunities.'* Roma woman living in Ireland, 26 years.

*'Parents should stop being afraid of sending their girls to school, we have to prioritize education. We have to break the circle, and this will be achieved by first educating parents so that they do not repeat the circle, the world has changed,*

*now we no longer have to be afraid we can have more opportunities and a better life. Everything bad in the world is fought with education, so we can fight better for our rights.'* Roma woman living in Ireland, 53 years.

*'Girls should prioritise studying.'* Roma Woman, 28 years, Portugal.

*'Children should finish school earlier and become mothers at an older age.'* Roma Woman, 48 years, Greece.

*'Children should get married at older ages, such as 20 to 22. They should go to school and finish school.'* Roma Woman, 19 years, Greece.

In Romania and Portugal in particular, the importance of role models is emphasised. The role of older women is also highlighted in Portugal:

*'I think it would be good if we had more positive role models'.* Roma Woman, 19 years, Romania.

*'Roma women should talk to teenagers and set an example for them'.* Roma Woman, 24 years, Portugal.

*'A respected woman in the community should be the one to have this conversation.'* Roma Woman, 46 years, Portugal.

*'Talking to older people it makes you realise that there's time for everything and that there's no point in rushing.'* Roma Woman, 50 years, Portugal.

*'Meet someone who is important and respected in the community.'* Roma Woman, 28 years, Portugal.

Some of them 'dared' to give advice to the family of origin on how parents should view the marriage of young girls:

*'Families should talk to young people to make them aware that there's a time for everything, and that they will benefit if they allow events to happen in their own time.'* Roma Woman, 29 years, Portugal

*'I would tell parents that they should be more attached to their daughters. Not let them get married. Have relationships but not get married and not have children at a young age.'* Roma Woman, 49 years, Greece.

*'This does not depend on the girls; it depends on the parents and education in home.'* Roma Woman, 38 years, Ireland.

*'I think it would be good for us parents to be trained'.* Roma Woman, 31 years, Romania.

*'Parents should explain to their children that childhood is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Marriage is not a joke; it involves responsibilities.'* Roma Woman, 31 years, Portugal.

*'Parents need to learn that it is wrong for children to have children. It would be good for them to get married and have children at a legal age. To enjoy their lives. To find a job so they can live. To have a maximum of 3 children and not 10.'* Roma Woman, 53 years, Greece.

*'Parents should send their children to school. When children go to school, they think differently, they become smarter. Parents should not marry their children young.'* Roma Woman, 30 years, Greece.

*'The problem are the mothers-in-law. The mothers of the boys. We need to talk to the mothers of the boys and tell them that girls are still children. They need to finish elementary and high school. They need to get married after they are 18. They need to know what they want.'* Roma Woman, 28 years, Greece.

*'There should be fines and imprisonment for parents who "marry" their teenage children.'* Roma Woman, 28 years, Greece.

Others are aimed at the girls themselves and their capacity for self-determination so that they don't give in to community pressures:



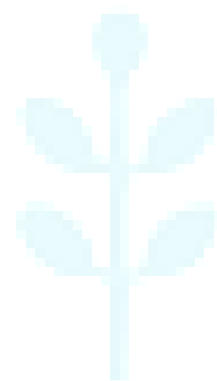
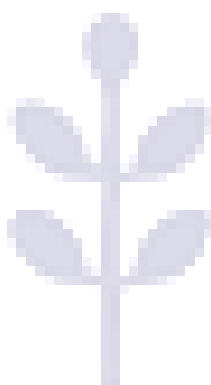
*'We need to tell girls that they need to go to school, finish it, go to college so they can get a job and be independent. When all of that is done, get married so they can support themselves and their children.'* Roma Woman, 45 years, Greece.

*'We need to tell girls that they need to continue school, study, get a job, have their own money and everything will come at the right age. e.g. 25 years old.'* Roma Woman, 40 years, Greece.

*'Many girls don't know how not to get pregnant. If someone explained it to us, maybe we wouldn't have children so early.'* Roma Woman, 25 years, Romania.

In conclusion, here's a quote from a Roma woman who emphasises integration as a fundamental pillar:

*'Society has to stop being xenophobic. Because they never make integration easy. Once there is ease of integration, it will be easier for the girls and the Roma community to become aware.'* Roma Woman, 29 years, Portugal.



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