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

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Project Context

This synthesis was prepared within the framework of the Erasmus+ project “Roma Influencers – Breaking the Circle of Early Marriages and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities”. It draws on the national policy recommendation reports produced by the project partners in Greece, Ireland, Romania and Portugal, following the methodological orientations established for Work Package 3, Activity 3.4.

The document identifies the main common findings, structural challenges and policy priorities emerging across the four national contexts, while highlighting country-specific approaches and recommendations. It adopts a rights-based, intersectional and community-centred perspective aligned with European frameworks on Roma inclusion, children’s rights, gender equality and anti-discrimination.

1. Executive Summary

Early marriage and early motherhood continue to affect, among other socially and economically vulnerable groups, Roma girls and young women across several European countries. The national reports from Greece, Ireland, Romania and Portugal demonstrate that these phenomena cannot be understood solely through a cultural lens. Rather, they are deeply connected to structural inequalities, including poverty, social exclusion, educational disadvantage, gender inequality, discrimination, insecure housing, and limited access to healthcare and public services.

Looking specifically at Roma communities in the partner countries, the reports produced within the Roma Influencers project identify, across all four countries, a strong relationship between early marriage, school dropout and early motherhood. As was often the case in many Western societies in the past, Roma girls may still face social expectations linked to traditional gender roles, family honour and motherhood as a marker of adult identity. At the same time, many women interviewed during the research expressed awareness of the negative consequences associated with early marriage and early motherhood, including interrupted education, reduced employment opportunities, economic dependence, mental health challenges and limited autonomy.

Although the four countries differ in terms of legal frameworks, institutional capacities and policy implementation models, several common strategies emerge. Community participation, Roma women's leadership and culturally sensitive interventions are therefore considered essential components of effective policy responses.

Another important conclusion is that sustainable progress requires coordinated, long-term, rights-based public policies developed in partnership with Roma communities themselves. Effective responses must combine legal protection with social inclusion measures, educational opportunities, health services and the active participation of Roma women and girls.

2. Problem Statement

Child, early and forced marriages, as well as early motherhood, are internationally recognized as practices that may compromise children's rights, gender equality, educational participation and social inclusion. International organizations such as UNICEF, the Council of Europe and the European Union have consistently highlighted the negative impacts of these phenomena on girls' health, autonomy and life opportunities.

The national reports produced within the *Roma Influencers* project demonstrate that early marriage and early motherhood remain present in some Roma communities in Greece, Ireland, Romania and Portugal. However, the reports also make clear that these phenomena must not be interpreted as inherent or homogeneous characteristics of Roma culture.

The reports consistently highlight the intersectional nature of the problem. Roma girls are frequently positioned at the intersection of ethnic discrimination, gender inequality and socioeconomic vulnerability.

A recurring finding across the four countries is, as already emphasized, the strong link between early marriage and school dropout. The reports also highlight important health dimensions. Although there are some differences between countries, young mothers generally experience barriers in accessing healthcare services, reproductive health information, prenatal care and mental health support.

The legal frameworks differ across countries. The law clearly prohibits child marriage without exceptions in Portugal (Law No. 39/2025) and Ireland (Civil Registration Act 2014). In Greece and Romania, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18, although exceptions may exist under certain circumstances. Despite these legal restrictions, the reports show that informal unions continue to occur at very early stages of life. This reveals important gaps between legislation and social realities, emphasizing the need for preventive, community-based and multidimensional approaches.

At the same time, the research identifies signs of social change. Younger Roma women increasingly emphasize the importance of education, delayed motherhood, professional

opportunities and personal autonomy. Many participants expressed a desire for greater access to information, support and opportunities.

Many of them also expressed the wish to experience their childhood without the pressures associated with marriage and motherhood, without the pressure of the responsibilities associated with marriage and motherhood:

‘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).

‘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, Portugal).

‘Girls are still children. They must not get married.’ (Greek 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).

3. Comparative Analysis of Main Findings

One of the strongest common findings across all four reports is the recognition that early marriage and early motherhood are closely linked to structural inequalities rather than being solely cultural practices.

The Greek report emphasizes that early marriage is embedded in broader contexts of intergenerational poverty, social exclusion and gender inequality. Similarly, the Romanian report highlights the role of poverty, discrimination, poor housing conditions and limited access to education and healthcare. Portugal explicitly warns against interpreting early marriage as a homogeneous cultural characteristic of Roma communities, while the Irish report stresses the role of social exclusion, insecure living conditions and barriers to services.

All reports advocate for non-stigmatizing approaches that recognize the diversity of Roma communities and the importance of addressing wider social determinants.

Education emerges as one of the central themes across the four countries.

The reports consistently identify school dropout as both a cause and a consequence of early marriage and early motherhood. Girls frequently leave school due to marriage expectations, pregnancy or caregiving responsibilities. In many cases, educational interruption significantly limits future employment opportunities and reinforces cycles of poverty.

Romania and Portugal particularly emphasize the need for stronger school retention policies, mentoring programmes and educational mediation. Greece highlights compulsory school attendance and the role of Roma mediators within the education system, while Ireland stresses flexible educational pathways and childcare support for young mothers.

Importantly, all reports advocate enabling pregnant girls and young mothers to remain in or return to education.

Healthcare access and reproductive rights constitute another key policy area.

The reports highlight significant barriers to reproductive health education and to healthcare access among Roma girls and women particularly regarding prenatal classes.

Portugal identifies communication difficulties with healthcare professionals. In Greece, Ireland and Romania one of the main reasons was that many women were unaware of these classes because they had never been informed about them. Among Roma women living in Ireland, language once again emerges as a key barrier to accessing prenatal classes.

4. Policy recommendations

The different country reports consistently emphasize that sustainable interventions require the following strategies:



The **empowerment of Roma girls and women** is strongly reflected in the policy recommendations of all countries. Ireland strongly emphasizes the importance of Roma women's voices in policy development and service design. Portugal highlights the role of Roma mediators and respected women within communities. Romania stresses the involvement of Roma organizations, mediators and women influencers in awareness campaigns. Greece stresses the need to develop programmes aimed at the empowerment of Roma girls and the promotion of positive role models.

This emphasis reflects a broader shift away from paternalistic interventions toward participatory governance and empowerment-based models, which are understood as essential for strengthening autonomy, informed decision-making and long-term social inclusion.

All the reports also point to weaknesses in **institutional coordination**. Romania particularly highlights fragmented services and insufficient cooperation between schools, healthcare systems and social services, while also providing detailed recommendations regarding multidisciplinary teams involving schools, social services, healthcare providers and Roma organizations. Similarly, Portugal advocates interinstitutional cooperation between schools, health services and social intervention actors, while Greece calls for integrated policy mixes combining legislation, education, health and social protection. Ireland, on the other hand, emphasizes integrated, multisectoral and community-based approaches.

The reports consistently reject punitive or purely prohibition-based approaches. Instead, they support **dialogue-based interventions and community-led awareness campaigns**. This reflects recognition that sustainable social change requires trust, participation and local ownership.

From the different reports, it can be understood that all policies and local interventions must be grounded in the recognition of the universality of human rights and children's rights, while also promoting dialogue between different social and cultural groups, as well as between professionals and Roma communities. Greece specifically mentions the need to promote dialogue with community and religious leaders in order to challenge harmful practices without reinforcing stigmatization.

Regarding **prevention**, all four countries identify **education** as a central prevention strategy. Key priorities include:

- Preventing school dropout, namely through cooperation between the education system, social services, local authorities and civil society organizations;
- Expanding mentoring programmes;
- Providing flexible educational pathways for young mothers;
- Investing in livelihood training, vocational skills and financial literacy for adolescent girls in order to provide alternatives to early marriage.
- Training teachers in intercultural competencies;
- Increasing the role of Roma mediators;
- Developing national campaigns, conducted in a non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate manner, promoting the right to education, children's right to leisure, and children's development through education.

Education is consistently framed not only as a protective factor but also as a pathway toward autonomy, social participation and economic independence.

Still in a **prevention perspective**, the reports advocate accessible, culturally appropriate and community-based **healthcare** responses.

Shared priorities include:

- Sexual and reproductive health education, namely through support for community-led discussions within Roma communities;
- Ensure access to culturally sensitive information on sexual and reproductive health, ideally delivered by trained Roma peer educators.
- Culturally sensitive prenatal and maternal healthcare services provided by professionals who use inclusive communication strategies in order to build trust between Roma communities and healthcare institutions.
- Mobile healthcare units;
- Mental health support;
- Confidential and non-discriminatory healthcare provision.

As the report from Greece stresses, it is crucial to stress that “policies aimed at preventing early marriages and early motherhood can be enriched through a modern public health approach that takes into account the role of perigenetics and epigenetics. Living conditions before, during, and after pregnancy — such as poverty, chronic stress, limited access to healthcare, education, and social support — affect not only the current health of both mother and child, but also future developmental opportunities.

For this reason, targeted interventions are proposed to support young Roma women and families, with an emphasis on prenatal care, mental health, parenting education, and the creation of stable, safe environments that enhance intergenerational social mobility and equal opportunities.”

All four reports recommend **specialized training for professionals working with Roma communities**. Priority areas include: Children’s rights; Gender equality; Anti-discrimination; Intercultural communication; Early identification of risk situations; Referral procedures; Reproductive health; Community engagement.

Training of professionals is viewed as necessary to improve institutional responses and reduce discriminatory practices.

Finally, **data gaps** are identified as a significant challenge in all four countries. The reports stress the lack of systematic, disaggregated and non-stigmatizing data on: early marriage; informal unions and teenage pregnancy. In some countries it is also important to collect data on school dropout rates.

Romania and Portugal place strong emphasis on national monitoring systems and evidence-based policymaking. Greece recommends early warning systems involving schools, healthcare services and social services. Ireland calls for ethical and non-stigmatizing data collection practices.

Improved data collection is viewed as essential for:

- Understanding trends;
- Identifying high-risk areas;
- Monitoring policy effectiveness;
- Allocating resources;
- Designing targeted interventions.

5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the national reports from Greece, Ireland, Romania and Portugal demonstrates that early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities are multidimensional social phenomena rooted in structural inequalities and social exclusion.

Although legal frameworks on child marriage exist in all four countries, legislation alone is insufficient to address the problem. Sustainable prevention requires integrated, rights-based and participatory approaches capable of addressing the broader social determinants affecting Roma girls and young women.

A particularly important shared message is the need to avoid stigmatizing or culturally reductive interpretations. Early marriage and early motherhood must be understood within broader contexts of poverty, exclusion, discrimination and limited opportunities.

The reports also demonstrate the importance of involving Roma communities directly in designing and implementing solutions. Roma women's lived experiences, leadership and participation are central to developing effective and sustainable interventions.

Finally, the synthesis highlights that meaningful progress requires long-term political commitment, sustained public investment and strong cooperation between governments, public services, civil society organizations and Roma communities themselves.

Only through coordinated and inclusive approaches will it be possible to break cycles of exclusion and expand opportunities for Roma girls and young women across Europe.

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