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



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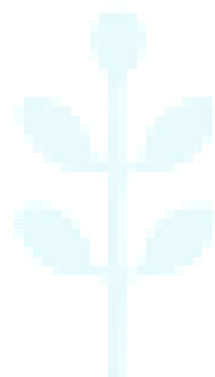
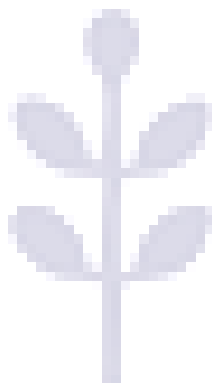


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Work Package 3, Activity 3.4: National Policy Recommendations

Portugal

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Child, early and forced marriages, as well as early motherhood, continue to represent significant challenges to human rights, gender equality, and the social inclusion of Roma communities in Portugal. Despite the overall decline in adolescent pregnancy rates in the country and recent legislative changes prohibiting the marriage of minors under the age of 18, social and cultural practices that favour informal unions and early motherhood still persist.

The Portuguese national report of the Roma Influencers project highlights that, in some Roma communities, girls continue to enter into marital unions and become mothers before the age of 18. These situations are often associated with school dropout, limited personal and economic autonomy, and increased risks to physical and mental health.

The interviews conducted with Roma women in Portugal, similarly to those carried out in the other European countries involved in the project, show that marriage and motherhood continue to be strongly valued as central elements of female identity. However, they also reveal an increasing awareness of the negative consequences associated with these experiences.

In this context, the present document puts forward recommendations addressed to policymakers, professionals working in education, health, justice and social intervention, as well as civil society organisations. The recommendations advocate for integrated, culturally sensitive and rights-based approaches centred on the rights of children and women, while simultaneously promoting dialogue with Roma communities and the empowerment of girls and women.

2. Problem Definition

In Portugal, child, early and forced marriage — or similar unions — is understood as any situation in which a person under the age of 18 lives with another person in conditions analogous to those of spouses, whether or not they have been coerced into such a union, regardless of their cultural, ethnic or national background. The approval of Law No. 39/2025 strengthened the protection of children and young people by prohibiting the marriage of minors under any circumstances, including with parental consent.

Despite this legislative progress, the phenomenon of early marriage persists, particularly through informal unions. In some community contexts, these practices may be associated with social and cultural norms related to gender roles, the valorisation of virginity, the preservation of family honour and the continuity of traditions.

Roma women face specific challenges in the areas of education, employment, housing and health. National and European studies indicate that Roma girls leave school earlier than Roma boys and the general population, often due to pressure to marry and start a family at a young age.

It is therefore essential to develop integrated public policies capable of reconciling:

- The protection of the rights of children and young people.
- The fight against discrimination and social exclusion.
- Respect for cultural diversity.
- The promotion of gender equality.
- The active involvement of Roma communities in the definition of solutions.

It is also important to recognise that early marriages and early motherhood are frequently associated with contexts of poverty, social exclusion and structural inequality, and should not be simplistically interpreted as a homogeneous cultural characteristic of Roma communities in general.

3. “Roma Influencers” Project: Main Findings

The data collected within the framework of the Roma Influencers project, through 50 interviews conducted with Roma women from different generations, show that:

- Many interviewees (24) married or entered into a union before the age of 18. The average age at marriage or the beginning of cohabitation was approximately 17 years old.
- Early marriage was, in most cases, associated with early motherhood. The average age at the birth of the first child was around 19 years old, significantly lower than the Portuguese national average.
- Adolescent pregnancy has not significantly decreased across generations.
- Many young women stopped studying or working after marriage, with motherhood frequently interrupting educational and professional aspirations. Nevertheless, most interviewees stated that they would have liked to continue their studies for a longer period.

Although some women stated that early marriage was a personal choice, the interviews reveal that this decision is often conditioned by social norms and community expectations.

In their narratives, it is evident that, after marriage — formalised or not — the birth of a child represents the transition into adulthood. This is regarded as a deeply valued event, both by the women themselves and by their families. The feeling most frequently associated with pregnancy was joy, as well as the recognition and respect women gain within their communities.

Social pressure, although often invisible, continues to be present in contexts where tradition and its transmission across generations hold great importance.

Many interviewed women also demonstrated awareness that early marriage and motherhood bring an early end to childhood and lead to responsibilities for which they sometimes did not feel prepared.

Furthermore, several interviewees reported negative impacts on their health. Some described physical difficulties, while others mentioned emotional and psychological consequences related to early motherhood.

Although most women received medical support during pregnancy, important barriers to accessing healthcare remain, namely:

- Lack of information.
- Shame or fear of seeking support.
- Communication difficulties with healthcare professionals.
- Dependence on family accompaniment.
- Low participation in childbirth preparation courses.

Mental health deserves particular attention, as several women referred to symptoms associated with postpartum depression.

Despite these challenges, signs of change are also emerging, particularly among younger women, who emphasise the importance of education, delaying motherhood and promoting female autonomy.

It is also important to acknowledge that early marriages and early motherhood are often associated with poverty, social exclusion and structural inequality, and should

not be interpreted simplistically as a homogeneous cultural characteristic of Roma communities in general.

4. Policy Options and Recommendations

1. Strengthen data collection and monitoring of the phenomenon

It is essential to produce updated, regular and disaggregated data on early motherhood in order to support evidence-based public policies.

Suggested actions:

- Create national monitoring mechanisms.
- Strengthen cooperation between education, health, child protection and social security services.
- Develop specific studies on the topic.

2. Promote culturally appropriate prevention and awareness-raising programmes

Prevention strategies should actively involve Roma communities, valuing dialogue and cultural respect.

Suggested actions:

- Develop campaigns targeting families and young people.
- Organise information sessions on human rights and children's rights.
- Involve Roma mediators and women recognised within their communities.



3. Strengthen the role of schools in preventing school dropout

Schools should play a central role in the early identification of risk situations and in promoting Roma girls' retention in the education system.

Suggested actions:

- Create mentoring programmes for Roma girls.
- Disseminate existing educational support programmes.
- Train education professionals in intercultural intervention and, more specifically, on Roma culture.
- Promote interinstitutional cooperation between schools, services and social intervention actors to prevent early marriages and motherhood, while supporting girls' continued education, access to information and the development of autonomous life projects.

4. Improve access to sexual and reproductive health

Health services must ensure accessible, inclusive and culturally sensitive responses.

Suggested actions:

- Ensure timely, accessible and culturally safe sexual and reproductive health consultations for Roma girls, including family planning consultations before pregnancy occurs and after motherhood.
- Strengthen free and informed access to a diversified range of contraceptive methods beyond the pill, as this method may not be the most suitable for all young women due to the need for daily use, including long-acting methods such as implants, injectables or IUDs, always based on free, informed and confidential consent.
- Create community-based responses through mobile health teams, Roma mediators, community health nurses and partnerships with local associations, in order to reduce barriers to accessing healthcare centres.





- Ensure sexual and reproductive health education adapted to age, cultural context and literacy levels, involving girls, boys, families and communities, without reinforcing prejudice or blaming young women.
- Train health, education and social intervention professionals in intercultural competencies, sexual and reproductive rights, confidentiality and the prevention of discrimination in the care of young Roma women.
- Guarantee confidentiality and autonomy for young women during consultations, creating conditions in which they can ask questions, choose contraceptive methods and receive support without fear of judgement, exposure or discrimination.

It is also important to value and replicate community-based responses previously implemented in Portugal, such as the “Saúde sobre Rodas” (“Health on Wheels”) project, developed in Bairro da Cucena, in the municipality of Seixal, which demonstrated potential to reduce barriers to healthcare access in socially vulnerable territories. This type of community intervention may be particularly relevant in contexts where high levels of early motherhood are recorded.

5. Train professionals for early identification and intervention

Professionals working in education, health, justice and social intervention require specialised training on child, early and forced marriages, as well as on the universality of human rights.

Suggested actions:

- Develop continuous interdisciplinary training;
- Create intervention and referral protocols;
- Promote practices centred on human rights and child protection.



6. Strengthen the empowerment of Roma girls and women

Sustainable prevention depends on promoting the autonomy, participation and leadership of Roma women.

Suggested actions:

- Support projects led by Roma women.
- Encourage civic and community participation.
- Promote educational and professional opportunities.
- Create safe spaces for sharing experiences and mutual support among women.

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