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Dream Up Aim Up Project

„Integrated Community-centered Services for Prevention of Child Marriages of Roma in Bulgaria“

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Dream Up, Aim Up: The challenges of combatting child marriages in Bulgaria

This publication is developed within the framework of the "Dream Up, Aim Up project: Integrated community-centered services for the prevention of child marriages of Roma in Bulgaria" (101096148 — Dream UP Aim UP — CERV-2022-DAPHNE) realized in the period of March 2023 - February 2025. The project is funded by the EU and is implemented by a consortium of Bulgarian civil organizations, the coordinator being C.E.G.A. Foundation - Creating Effective Grassroot Alternatives, and partners - Roma-Lom Foundation and Zakrilnitsi (Defenders) Association.

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The Book is structured in 7 chapters:

- Introduction
- Briefly about the methodology of the research
- The Context – the child marriages among the Roma communities in Bulgaria
- Attitudes towards child marriages – a summary of the results of the field study
- The extremely difficult problem "children give birth to children" – The legal framework
- Interventions and services for prevention of child marriages
- Conclusions and recommendations

The English summary is presenting the key findings, conclusions and recommendations outlined in detail in the published book.



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1 Introduction

The book “Dream Up, Aim Up: The challenges of combatting child marriages in Bulgaria” is summarizing the findings and conclusions of the desk research and qualitative field study of attitudes towards family models and prospects for the realization of young people in Roma and other detached ethnic communities in Bulgaria. It is realized within the framework of the "Dream Up, Aim Up project: Integrated community-centered services for the prevention of child marriages of Roma in Bulgaria" (1 March 2023 – 28 February 2025). The project is funded by the EU and is implemented by a consortium of Bulgarian civil organizations, the coordinator being C.E.G.A. Foundation - Creating Effective Grassroot Alternatives, and partners - Roma-Lom Foundation and Zakrilnitsi (Defenders) Association.

The objective of the project is to contribute to ending the harmful practice of child marriages in Bulgaria by arming professionals with a community-based methodology for the prevention of harmful practices that encourage Roma girls to strive for personal achievements beyond the boundaries of isolation, and change traditional attitudes in the excluded Roma communities.

The project strategy follows the logic of demonstration modelling, which has proven its effectiveness in transforming social policies and services, with the following basic steps/interventions: (a) desk and qualitative field research; (b) developing an innovative methodology for social services and community work with a set of tools to prevent child marriages; (c) testing the toolkit in 6 pilot sites; (d) dissemination of the methodology and capacity building for its implementation by professionals in social services and community development organizations in Bulgaria.

The desk research and the field survey were carried out by a joint team of experts from the three partner organizations:

- C.E.G.A. Foundation – Rumyan Sechkov, Ralitz Sechkova, Ventsislav Kirkov;
- Roma-Lom Foundation – Tatiana Kirilova, Anita Marinova, Nikolay Kirilov;
- Zakrilnitsi Association – Milen Gechovski, Sigridur Kamenova, lawyer Petko Petkov (legal framework).

This book summarizes the conclusions of the study of the problem of early marriages, analyzed comprehensively in terms of the causes and current trends, the legal framework, the available experience in services and interventions for change and especially through the perspective of the isolated Roma communities, obtained through a qualitative field study in Bulgaria.

The book has a clear practical focus on supporting the development of an adequate methodology for the prevention of child marriages and early births among Roma communities in Bulgaria. Therefore, the book is not intended to enter into an academic debate. A large volume of research, analysis and statistical sources has been studied in the desk research, but due to the practical orientation of the publication, a detailed bibliography is not attached, but only sources that are directly cited in the text are indicated.

2 Briefly about the methodology of the research

2.1 Key concepts and terms used in the analysis

At the very beginning, we will specify some essential concepts that are used in the analysis in order to avoid the risk of misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations.



Premodern family models and Roma identity: The study is based on the understanding that **child marriages are not a "typical Roma tradition" characteristic of the Roma identity, but are in general characteristic of pre-modern societies and pre-modern family models in general.** From this point of view, the research team is convinced that ending the practice of child marriages and early births in no way affects the essential Roma identity, but will only help the transition from a pre-modern traditional society to the opportunities for development in the modern world. Pre-modern family models dominated Bulgarian society a century ago, as well as European societies in earlier times. In today's Bulgaria, they are still mostly preserved among segregated ethnic communities due to belated processes of modernization, decades of social exclusion, spatial segregation and isolation from the macro-society. Often, people from Roma communities recognize child marriages as "their tradition", without distinguishing pre-modern family models from the essential ethno-cultural specifics of their own identity. Such mix-up is not surprising for respondents from socially excluded groups, but is unacceptable for the media, social workers, police and prosecutors, central and local institutions.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that **the field research is not aimed at the Roma community in general, but at the detached Roma and other closed ethnic communities, where pre-modern family models and social norms still rule.** It is these communities that should be covered by the intensive programs to overcome the "pre-modern", for the purpose of widespread prevention of child marriages.

Child marriage: In the present study, child marriage is understood as the premature cohabitation of children and young people under the age of 18, including in cases where only one partner (most often the girl) is under 18 years of age. Child marriages and early pregnancy are considered a harmful practice within the context of Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/General Comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.¹

Marriage and marital age: The concept of marriage (and marriageable age, accordingly,) is used in the analysis as a generalizing concept, both for civil marriage - officially legally registered, and for cohabitation on a family basis, which according to traditional social norms in the studied communities is accepted as marriage after it is announced and legitimized before the community by the parents and/or the newlyweds.

Roma communities, ethnic communities of historical Roma origins: The Roma in Bulgaria are a diverse and heterogeneous community, composed of metagroups and subgroups with their own identity. With respect for the right to self-identification, the general term "Roma and other groups in a similar situation" has been adopted in the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma in the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020).² In the current National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma (2021-2030) "the term Roma is also used as a general term. It includes groups of people who have more or less similar but not identical cultural and social characteristics. Their self-identification can also be different."³

¹ Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: General Comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding harmful practices.

<http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/GC/31/CRC/C/GC/18>

² National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration 2012-2020 (NSRBRI).

<https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=726>

³ National strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma (2021-2030).

<https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1541>



Detached/closed/isolated ethnic community: Neighborhoods/territories with compact populations of disadvantaged ethnic minority communities who live in isolation, cut off from the macro-society.

Marginalized groups and families: Within vulnerable communities, there are often areas of highly marginalized groups/families that are doubly isolated and unaccepted, both by their community and the macro-society, with permanently broken connections, widening disparities in living standards, persistent unemployment and isolation from the labor market of all generations, having dominance of survival priorities at the expense of development and personal fulfillment.

2.2 Objectives and tasks, scope and methods of the field study

The general objective of the research is to identify the constraints and potentials for tackling the early marriages in Roma communities. In this context, the **qualitative field study** is aimed to establish and analyze the attitudes in detached Roma communities regarding family models with a special focus, firstly, on child cohabitations/marriages and early births, and secondly - on the attitudes and expectations of the different age groups towards the prospects and the alternatives for the future realization of young people.

The conclusions and recommendations of the research are intended for use at the local and national levels for the purpose of developing a comprehensive methodological package of tools, programs and models for intervention, resources and knowledge for the prevention of child marriages. The methodological package shall be made available to professionals in the social system, to municipalities and social service providers, Roma and pro-Roma NGOs who work for community development in detached communities, schools, youth centers and other partners within education, health care, protection of human rights systems.

Subject of the qualitative field study are the dominant pre-modern family models, traditions and practices in closed communities, attitudes towards child marriages/cohabitations and early births in childhood, ideas about success and fulfillment of young people, family and community hierarchy when making decisions about marriage and life fulfillment, factors and trends towards change.

Object of the study are Roma representatives and other detached ethnic communities in a similar situation with different social status, including Roma mediators and activists. Respondents in the thematic group discussions are adolescents and young people (aged 16-25), as well as people from the older generations - those of parents and grandparents. The focus is on Roma girls/young women who are most at risk of violence, coercion and violation of human rights, for whom early cohabitation carries the greatest risks for their health, education and personal fulfillment.

Methods. The qualitative research was carried out "face to face" through thematic group discussions, as well as using methods of social anthropology by observation of the situation in the communities. Semi-structured in-depth group interview methods, based on an open-ended questionnaire, followed flexibly by field workers in a soft-facilitation style, were applied to stimulate the frank sharing of respondents' authentic opinions. The questions were asked in a language understandable to the respondents, appropriate to their age, education and manner of verbal expression.

Ethical standards and norms were observed in the study and in the analysis of the data: **voluntary** participation, **informed consent**, documented by a declaration of consent, signed by the adult respondents or by a parent/guardian for minors (16-18 years old); **anonymity and confidentiality** when presenting the results; **respect for human rights, non-discrimination and respect** for the personality of the respondents. The principle of **non-harm** guarantees the inviolability of the respondents' personality, avoiding trauma and possible negative consequences arising from their participation.

The "entrance" of field workers to the closed community was provided by local authority figures - activists of a Roma NGO, health and educational mediators, pastors, social workers. They provided invaluable



support for consent to participate and ensure the respondents' necessary trust in the field workers to overcome their fears and share their candid opinions and personal stories, including language translation for respondents who do not speak Bulgarian.

2.3 Scope of the field research and profile of respondents

Territorial coverage and performance of the sample.

The study covers 10 isolated Roma and ethnic communities across the country to represent the diversity among these communities, determined by ethnic and subgroup self-identification, mother tongue, traditions, religion, levels of poverty, social exclusion and trends towards marginalization. It was carried out in a period of 6 months - from July to the beginning of December 2023 by teams of the partner organizations:

- C.E.G.A. Foundation: Lehchevo, Novi Pazar, Rakitovo and Samokov;
- Roma-Lom Foundation: Stolipinovo (Plovdiv), Lovech and Vidin;
- Zakrilnitsi (Defenders) Association - Tvarditsa, Sredets and Rozino.

Baseline indicators for the field survey have been achieved fully satisfactorily. The sample covers 5 of the 6 development regions in Bulgaria. 3 of the locations are in the regional centers, another 5 are in municipal centers, other than the regional city, and 2 locations are in villages. A total of 38 group interviews have been conducted in the 10 locations (95% of the planned 40 interviews), a total of 319 respondents have been covered - 99.69% of the planned 320 respondents. There are certain deviations in the **composition of the groups** for the thematic discussions in relation to the research methodology. Due to the voluntary nature of participation, the division of respondents by gender and age has not been strictly observed: 20 groups have been made with a "pure" composition in relation to the categories of respondents, and the rest have been mixed by gender or age. The studied locations largely reflect the **diversity of Roma communities** in terms of social exclusion and poverty, education, sub-group identity, religion, trends in migration processes, etc.

The profile of the respondents shows a significant overweight of women. In the planned indicators of the original methodology, a ratio of 180 women to 140 men (or 56% to 44%) has been set, but in the implementation, the difference has been increased to 66% to 34% in favor of women. Young people are underrepresented compared to the generations of their parents, grandparents. The share of girls and young women can be considered achieved with nearly 96% of the expected number, but with regard to boys and young men, only about 66% of the intended respondents have been covered. These deviations are due to the voluntary principle of inclusion of the respondents. Given the distribution of decision-making prerogatives in the traditional Roma family, it is expected that women of the older generation will more willingly than men participate in discussing family and marriage topics.

3 The Context – the child marriages among the Roma communities in Bulgaria

3.1 The process of modernization of Roma communities in Bulgaria

Inherited from the past, the practice of child marriages is gradually phasing out in Bulgaria, but it is still preserved in isolated Roma and other ethnic communities, living in a similar situation. According to data from the National Statistical Institute, early births are decreasing, but Bulgaria continues to be among the EU countries with a relatively high share of early births to mothers under 18.



The continuing harmful practices and family models are due to the delayed modernization processes of the traditional Roma communities in Bulgaria, which are slowly developing with a delay of 80-90 years compared to the majority. But as of the end of the previous century, modernization marked progress and there are clear signs of rupture in the pre-modern traditional community of the large household, with persistent trends towards a reduction in the number of children, a reduction in child marriages and early births, the emergence of the young family beyond the apparent security of the parental community and beyond the dictates of the mother-in-law and older generations. According to studies, until 1994, about 80% of Roma started families before they reached adulthood⁴, but after that, this share sharply decreased and early marriages persisted mainly among the poorest and least educated families and young people. The usual age of marriage is gradually being raised and child marriages are being curbed, but the problem is far from solved.

The National Statistics Institute recorded a relatively low, but alarming percentage of officially registered child marriages, concluded with court permission, varying between 1.7% and 2.31% of all marriages in the period 2016-2022. In absolute terms, this presents 3,720 officially married minors - mainly girls (boys under 18 are only 173).⁵ But these 3,547 registered child brides during the period are only the top of the iceberg. However, statistical data cannot detect the number of informal cohabitations in closed neighborhoods where at least one of the partners is a child; the data lacks the cases of girls under 16 or even under 14, living in criminal cohabitation.

Over the past three decades, early births to mothers under the age of 20 initially declined sharply, from 24.9% of all live births in 1993 to 10.5% in 2013 and 9.8% in 2014, after that, however, this trend has frozen at levels varying between 10.1% and 10.5% of live births to mothers under 20 years of age. In 2020, there were 5,970 (10.1%) children born to mothers under 20 years of age, in 2021 they were 5,861, and in 2022 – 5,769 or 10.2% of all live births⁶. These statistics are not disaggregated by ethnicity, and early births occur in all ethnic groups, not only among Roma.⁷ Moreover, even as adults, mothers aged 18-19 are still of school age – marriage and childbearing at this age removes girls from education far too early and hinders their access to the labor market.

The field study confirms that harmful practices of child marriages and early births are still alive in isolated Roma communities, embedded in pre-modern social norms and family patterns, mainly in interior areas of deep poverty and marginalization. It is important to emphasize that the problem is now typical of segregated Roma neighborhoods and not of Roma living in mixed areas and integrated into the macro-society.

3.2 Social exclusion and distances between Roma and macro-society

Social exclusion and deep gaps from the macro-society predetermine the complexity of risks, the way of life in families, the different everyday life of children, the opportunities for development and personal fulfillment. The necessary support to gradually close the gap essentially predetermines the goals of social

⁴ Tomova I. Gypsies in the transition period. Sofia, International Center for Minority Issues and Cultural Interactions (ICMICI), 1995.

⁵ NSI data <https://nsi.bg/bg/content/3028/marriages>

⁶ NSI data: <https://nsi.bg/en/content/2953/fertility>

⁷ Tomova I., Stoychev L. Thematic report on the situation of the Roma. Sofia, 2021. pages 56-57. https://www.noveleea.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Tematichen-doklad-za-romite_BG.pdf



inclusion services for segregated Roma communities. These gaps and barriers to the Roma social inclusion are observed in all communities covered in the field study.

Spatial segregation of Roma is a product of processes and policies of controlled separation of different ethnicities, including Roma, into separate neighborhoods ever since the time of the Ottoman Empire. Regarding the Roma, the policies of residential segregation continued in various forms after the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 and during the years of the communist regime, when the practices of forcibly displacing entire neighborhoods from the central areas to the outskirts of the cities continued. Research shows that in the first decades of the 21st century, more than three-quarters of Roma in Bulgaria still live segregated in detached neighborhoods on the outskirts of settlements, and only about 20-25% of them live in areas inhabited by the majority⁸. Territorial isolation and poor housing environment are a key barrier to overcoming social exclusion and quality of life in Roma communities. The share of Roma households in segregated neighborhoods deprived of access to basic facilities in life exceeds the average data for the country several times. The houses are small and overcrowded. The residential environment also creates gaps in the conditions for children's education: among Roma, 62.7% of households cannot provide a suitable place for children to study and do homework, compared to only 12.2% among Turks and 10.6% among Bulgarians.⁹

The level of education among the Roma is gradually increasing, but the huge gap with the majority remains. A nationally representative sociological survey among the Roma (January 2020) reports "an increase (six times) in the share of Roma who have completed higher education (from 0.2% in 2011 to 1.2% in 2019).¹⁰ According to the last Census (2021), 19.9% of self-identified Roma have no education, and another 23.2% have elementary education; 41.7% have primary education, and 14.4% have completed secondary education. For comparison, the average data for the country show 5.2% people without education, 5.8% with elementary and 16.4% with primary, 47.1% with secondary education. A serious growth in higher education among Roma has been registered: from 0.3 to 0.8%¹¹ – a hopeful indicator of change in the young Roma generation, but the difference of 31 times below the average rate for graduates in the country (25.5%) will require the efforts of several generations and decades to catching up.

The levels of poverty and social exclusion clearly outline the deep gaps between the Roma and the majority. The combined indicator of risk of poverty and social exclusion as at 2016 indicates such a risk among 90.7% of the population with Roma self-identification and 33.1% - among Bulgarians.¹² As at 2020, the data show a general trend towards decrease in the share of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion - among people with Roma identity, the share decreases to 79.4%, and among Bulgarians - to 25.1%¹³, nevertheless, the disparities remain extremely high. According to data from the 2021 Census, unemployment is highest among self-identified Roma ethnic groups - 51.2% of economically active Roma

⁸ Promotion of policies to overcome the territorial isolation of the Roma. Report from a study in Bulgaria 2016. C.E.G.A. Foundation, Sofia, 2017, page 4. <https://cega.bg/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Research-report-Bulgaria.pdf>

⁹ NSI. Report. Indicators of poverty and social inclusion in 2016, page 16.

¹⁰ Образование и реализация на ромската общност (2020). с. 16 [https://nrcpsystem.government.bg/DocumentsNGO/Education%20and%20Employment%20survey%20report%2020%20\(1\).pdf](https://nrcpsystem.government.bg/DocumentsNGO/Education%20and%20Employment%20survey%20report%2020%20(1).pdf)

¹¹ NSI. Ethnocultural characteristics of the population as at September 7, 2021. page 5. Census2021_ethnos.pdf

¹² There again.

¹³ https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/SILC2020_FRTG25T.pdf NSI. Report. Indicators of poverty and social inclusion for 2020. Report.



have declared themselves unemployed, compared to 20.9% of Turks and 8.4% of Bulgarians¹⁴. Levels of social exclusion and vulnerability are highest in areas of marginalization – among the most vulnerable families in these 'pockets of extreme poverty'. Known barriers to Roma access to employment, healthcare, administrative and public services, etc. are also identified in all locations of the field study.

Without being the focus of the field study, barriers of discrimination have been "detected" by field researchers, but in the most isolated communities, discrimination is rarely explicitly defined as a problem - they seem to be so used to it, with a sense of discrimination almost as natural part of life and the public environment, which speaks of low self-esteem and self-confidence among Roma and, in turn, creates additional barriers to social inclusion.

4 Attitudes towards child marriages – a summary of the results of the field study

4.1 Analysis of the community environment in the neighborhoods included in the field study

The profile of the studied Roma communities shows that the study sufficiently reflects the diversity of the Roma communities in terms of degrees of isolation and marginalization, social environment, poverty level, education, social status, sub-group identity, religion and trends in migration processes. The estimated population numbers of the surveyed communities below are as estimated by the respondents. As is well known, for many reasons the data from the census by ethnic self-determination of the population are far from corresponding to the real number of Roma living in Bulgaria.

In **small settlements such as Tvarditsa, Sredets and Rakitovo**, although living in detached neighborhoods, the Roma say that they do not feel isolated. For example, in **Tvarditsa**, people from the neighborhood share that they do not feel social exclusion, they have access to key services in the municipality, they feel accepted in the larger community and they do not feel discrimination on ethnic grounds. In Tvarditsa they define themselves as Roma (about 2100), with a Roma mother tongue, they speak Bulgarian well and are mostly Protestant Christians. In the Iztok (East) Roma quarter, many of the houses have been improved with funds from work "in the Balkan Mountains", with 75% of the homes being legally constructed; good infrastructure has been built there, such as roads that are wider than usual for Roma neighborhoods; the neighborhood has shops and cafes where people gather.

The Roma quarter Zapad (West) in **Rakitovo**, although far from the level of the rest of the town, is maintained in a decent condition, mainly thanks to the people - the houses are maintained, there is also significant new construction, mostly with funds from work abroad, but on the periphery, the people are extremely poor, housing conditions and infrastructure are in a deplorable state, there are also problematic families with many children and early marriages. A small part of the Roma in Rakitovo live in a mixed neighborhood with Bulgarian-Muslims, the so-called "White neighborhood" in which there is not a single person who has not completed secondary education and has not been able to realize themselves. The community in Rakitovo (about 4,200 people) defines itself as Roma – Christians and Muslims with a Roma identity and a Roma mother tongue.

¹⁴ NSI. Ethnocultural characteristics of the population as at September 7, 2021. page 6. Census2021_ethnos.pdf

The Pobeda Roma quarter in **Sredets** has worse housing conditions, it is located on the outskirts of the town on a steep hill towards the forest. It is home to nearly 2,000 residents, most of whom are of Roma origin. For the most part, the Roma live encapsulated and poor lives, but discrimination does not come up as a problem in the interviews. Often, several families with three, four or more children live in one house, there are illegal houses that have existed for decades. The roads are in a deplorable condition with large potholes that are being filled with debris from old roads.

Most Roma in these towns are poorer than the majority, they find it more difficult to find work, relying not so much on permanent income under an employment contract, but above all on "piecemeal" occasional work. In Tvarditsa and Rakitovo, they mainly find work as lumberjacks and in woodworking, gathering herbs and mushrooms in the forest, they rely on seasonal work to feed them in the winter season as well. There is also self-organization for "piecemeal" work in agriculture (Rakitovo). Younger Roma men from Sredets work mainly in construction in the regional city of Burgas, and older ones "in the mountains", but unlike Tvarditsa and Rakitovo, where many of the women work together with their husbands, Roma women in Sredets are housewives and fully take care of the house and children.

Children in Rakitovo, Tvarditsa and Sredets mainly attend mixed schools, but are often absent. School authorities make compromises because each student brings income to the school budget - so the official dropout rate is lower than the real one. A serious reason for dropping out of school in Tvarditsa is starting "work" in the Balkan Mountains, together with their parents from spring to late autumn. Older generations are generally less educated; men usually studied a little longer, and a large number of women – especially in Sredets – remained completely illiterate.

Although they have similarities, these three communities differ in terms of Roma subgroups, levels of Bulgarian language proficiency, and detached marginalized parts of the neighborhoods. In Tvarditsa and Sredets, the religion is Christian, with its various denominations - Orthodox, Protestant, while in Rakitovo part of the Roma are Muslims because they live next door to Bulgarian Muslims, but there, too, Islaam among the Roma is gradually being replaced mainly by Protestant denominations. All three communities speak different Romani dialects that they use at the household level. Proficiency in the official language is good, which also positively affects children's success in school.

Unlike these three towns, the community in the town of **Novi Pazar** is radically different. In the Druzhiba detached neighborhood (3,200 people), the residents are Muslim, they speak Turkish and identify themselves as Millet. The neighborhood is relatively well-developed, except for the marginalized zones in the outer streets, the houses have been renovated and their construction is being completed mainly with funds from those working abroad. Almost every family has migrants working abroad. The rest work in the town's enterprises, in agriculture, or are engaged in trade. The children attend school, but they do not do well, mainly because they do not have a good command of the Bulgarian language. The language barrier is a serious problem among all age groups and is one of the factors for the isolation of the community. People don't feel good outside the neighborhood because they cannot understand each other outside of it and prefer not to leave it.

Samokov is also a relatively small town, but with a large Roma quarter - around 5,000 people, who define themselves as Roma - Erlii with a Roma mother tongue, but speak decent Bulgarian. Proximity to Sofia and major resorts provides opportunities for income, especially in construction and services, therefore migration outside Bulgaria remains very low. There are influential Protestant churches with many followers in the neighborhood, which are organized into men's, women's and youth groups. The Roma community is characterized by a strong distrust of the authorities and even of Roma from other places. The children study in a segregated school, specially voted by the municipal council upon request of Roma community representatives, so that they do not go to other schools and do not study together with the



Bulgarians. Due to the isolation of the neighborhood, respondents are quite averse to talking about the sensitive topics of family patterns and child marriages.

In a regional center - **the town of Lovech**, the Roma live in several small detached settlements with visible indications of marginalization, isolated from the majority and among themselves – people do not communicate with each other, and marriages between them are rare. One of these segregated Roma localities is an apartment building, renovated by the municipality under a project, with good conditions, but the Roma are dissatisfied because they have to pay for heating, while before the renovation they were getting by as best they could. In the other neighborhood, the houses are very poor, unplastered on the outside, neglected. There is a shortage of jobs in Lovech and the Roma rely on social assistance and employment in construction here or in other cities. They declare that children go to school, but only few complete more than primary education. Protestant denominations have great influence among the Roma mainly because they distribute clothes and food. In some of these mini-neighborhoods, brides are sold and marriages between relatives are common, resulting in health problems and malformations among children.

The other regional center - **Vidin**, is also one of the cities in Bulgaria that is not developing well, like Lovech it is characterized with poor economic performance, the population is decreasing, and the Roma are moving abroad *en masse*, so the neighborhood is filled with life only in the summer, when the migrants come home to enjoy their vacations. The detached Roma quarter Nov Pat (New Road) is located outside the city boundaries (about 6000 people), relatively well laid out, most of the houses are large, but lately not well maintained because people don't live in the country. There is a segregated school in the neighborhood where half of the Roma children study. The other half travel to attend mainstream city schools. The population is Christian, their mother tongue is Romani, they identify themselves as Roma tinkers (*kalaygii*). The command of the official Bulgarian language is relatively good.

The largest segregated ethnic neighborhood in Bulgaria is **Stolipinovo in Plovdiv** - the second largest city in Bulgaria. According to various sources, about 45-50,000 people live in Stolipinovo. More than 80% of them are Muslim, with a Turkish mother tongue. They belong to the Millet Roma sub-group, and categorically self-identify as Turks and – unlike the Millets in Novi Pazar – are offended if someone calls them Roma. The rest are Burgudjian Roma - Christians, mostly from Protestant denominations, with a Roma mother tongue. The two groups have little contact with each other - there are few marriages between them. The macro-society in Plovdiv does not differentiate between them and defines everyone as Roma, which irritates those who define themselves as Turks. Men speak very poor Bulgarian, while women, and especially young girls, do not understand, do not speak Bulgarian at all and have no desire to learn it. Most children attend segregated schools in the neighborhood, where the educational level is the lowest in Bulgaria according to annual external assessments. The language barrier is among the main reasons. Unfortunately, there are examples of young people who have reached the 11th-12th grades without speaking the Bulgarian language. A small number of children attend mixed schools in the city. Turkish is spoken in the neighborhood, not knowing Bulgarian doesn't bother them, because they are self-sufficient - they hardly go out of the neighborhood, which has everything available: from restaurants, grocery stores, shops for building materials, to jewelry stores. Here the State has abdicated, Stolipinovo lives by its own rules and laws, perhaps 90% of the income in the neighborhood is generated within the gray economy, but the institutions do nothing to change the situation. Many of the residents have gone abroad (mainly to Germany and Belgium) and only come back in the summer - that's when the wedding season begins.

The smallest settlement in this field study is the **village of Lehchevo in the municipality of Boychinovtsi**. There is a detached neighborhood (about 500-600 people) in it, where Roma Christians (*Kalaygii* and *Tsutsumani*) live, of whom only the adults speak the Romani language. Young people speak only Bulgarian.



Education is at a good level - most graduate from secondary education, and many of them study at universities to obtain higher education. They mainly work in the regional city of Montana.

Rozino is the largest village in the Plovdiv region and the sixth most populous village in Bulgaria. The village is inhabited by ethnically diverse groups - Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, with the largest being the Roma community - about two-thirds of all residents (3,500 people). Most Roma are immigrants from different regions of the country - for example, there are two Roma neighborhoods in Rozino, the "immigrants" live in one of them, and in the other - the local Roma, who recognize themselves as "locals" and do not accept the others well. The upper hamlet of "the aliens" is on a steep hill with muddy, narrow streets, the houses are small, unmaintained and poor. Poverty level is high. Most men do "piecemeal" jobs in the forest and in construction. Women are housewives, they gather herbs in summer. Children drop out of school early - in 6-7 grades, depending on the age when they get married and have children. The elderly Roma, and especially women, are illiterate, they cannot read or write, and some people do not understand the Bulgarian language at all.

Local Roma organizations work in four of the studied communities - the "Budeste" (Future) foundation in Rakitovo, the "Hayaci" association in Novi Pazar, the "Foundation for Regional Development Roma-Plovdiv" in Stolipinovo, the Roma-Lom foundation in Lehchevo, as well as centers for social services. Vulnerable families in the remaining communities rely on support from state-delegated social services, which in Sredets and Tvarditsa work for prevention on a mobile basis in the community, but in Samokov, Rozino, Lovech and Vidin, the services reach the families only when there is an open case of high risk for the children.

In all of the researched communities, there are **marginalized areas** (the so-called "ghetto within the ghetto") that are isolated from the rest of the neighborhoods. They are doubly excluded/discriminated against - both by the macro-society and by "their" Roma community. Conflicts between the community and the marginalized group are not an exception, especially when the marginalized families are immigrants from another settlement. For example, the Roma in Lehchevo (tinkers and tsutsumani) went as far as making an appeal for the expulsion of the Roma immigrants (leshetari from Berkovitsa) from the village and were disappointed that the mayor rejected it. Tvarditsa is an exception, where no isolated "ghetto within the ghetto" exists, but there are separate marginalized families.

The impact of large-scale migration abroad changes the community environment in the neighborhoods not only through increased income and resources that enter Roma families, but also through imported role models, standards, requirements and attitudes towards family models. In the field study, the migration factor was detected most distinctly in 4 of the locations - Novi Pazar, Vidin, Rakitovo and Stolipinovo. In the past 7-8 years, the pattern of Roma migration abroad has been changing - a transition from the nomadic pattern (temporary labor migration of a family member/members to support the family in Bulgaria) to the pattern of resettlement of the whole family together with the children and reestablishing their life abroad.

The new pattern of migration results in significant changes in the situation in the communities: **First**, the demography of the neighborhoods changes to a sharp decrease in the number and density of the population. **Second**, the internal structure of the detached communities is changing - after the departure of the more proactive families, mostly vulnerable families at risk remain in the neighborhoods - the poor, the elderly, families with sick people and people with disabilities. Families from the most marginalized areas do not leave at all. **Third**, migration affects attitudes in communities. In Novi Pazar, Vidin and Rakitovo, migrants also bring new patterns of behavior, requirements for the living environment, compliance with rules, including child marriages. The establishment of migrant families abroad is seen as a model for success. In the self-segregated neighborhood of Stolipinovo, however, attitudes do not change, and migrants live abroad in isolation in compact groups, bringing Stolipinovo to Germany with its social



norms and behavioral patterns. They do not change their attitudes towards child marriages, but comply with the law abroad "*because there they punish*". They take the girl abroad with official permission from her parents, but hide it from the institutions - the underage girl stays like a prisoner at home, does not go out and no one sees it. The respondents do not comment on whether the marriage has been consummated, but efforts are made to ensure that the young bride does not give birth under the age of 18 "*so that the social officials do not catch them*".

4.2 Attitude towards child marriages

No open defenders of child marriages have been declared in the surveyed neighborhoods, but the recorded differences in the degree of disapproval shown suggest that parents and young people are far from unanimous. Parents without personal experience (neither they nor their children have been married young), as well as people with relatively better education and literacy, are more categorical in their denial of child marriages.

Among parents who have married young, opinions ranged from adamant denial of child marriages and reluctance for children to repeat their mistakes to evasive resignation. The wavering opinions of respondents from extremely poor marginalized families sound more like socially desirable statements, and the ensuing discussion shows a silent resignation to child marriages due to powerlessness and lack of prospects for development. Respondents who seemingly accept early marriages silently fail to answer the question or simply explain that "*it's a tradition and it's like that here because that's how things are done in the neighborhood.*"

Most respondents in Tvarditsa, Sredets, Novi Pazar, Lehchevo, Vidin and Rakitovo state a **firmly negative attitude towards child marriages** with the statement that children should finish their education and then think about marriage - there is no benefit to early marriage, the girl has not experienced her youth, she cannot take care of the child, she does not yet have maternal instincts, and therefore the mother-in-law takes care of the baby, and the daughter-in-law becomes a servant. Both women and girls in Lehchevo are unanimous that "*child marriages are not normal - girls lose their lives*"; "*these child marriages must be stopped*" which "*leave girls with no future and no choice in their lives*". None of the young respondents in Novi Pazar prefer to marry early because they have seen the bad example of their friends. In Tvarditsa, the girls are adamant: "*I don't want to be like my mother, who has 5 children and got married at the age of 14... That's why I finished secondary education and have only one child*".

The repetition of the pattern of child marriages is a natural mechanism for the continuation of child marriages - the daughter follows the example of her mother, but distinct opinions were heard of women rethinking their personal experiences and rejecting "their own" pattern. "*I don't want my daughter to live like me,*" declared mothers and grandmothers in Vidin. From her personal experience, a 70+ year old grandmother in Rakitovo rejected the model of child marriage: "*I got married at 14, gave birth, looked after children, looked after grandchildren, I saw nothing of life. So, my life has passed away. Girls shouldn't do that.*" The negative attitude towards early marriages does not yet mean that this practice has already disappeared in these communities, but the general trends appear to be decreasing in the last ten years or more.

The respondents in Samokov showed a **neutral and somewhat acquiescent attitude - they vaguely criticize early marriages, but accept them** because "*this is the tradition and as long as there is understanding, peace and love in the family, it does not matter at what age they got married.*" Here, Romani pastors are largely opposed to early marriages in the community.

An **uncritical attitude** towards child marriages was registered in Stolipinovo, Lovech and Rozino, where **early marriages are accepted as natural**. Unlike Samokov and Rakitovo, Protestant pastors in Lovech and



Rozino openly encourage child marriages by their personal example and by explaining that marriage in their church "will absolve the sin of the young" (Lovech) and early births are "*a blessing*" (Rozino). In Stolipinovo, both among the Millets and among the Burgudjian Roma, marriages with underage and minor girls are accepted as "*normal and natural*". Only men show some criticism of child marriages and point to women - mothers/grandmothers-to-be (who are around 40 years old) as the main driver of early marriages, they make the decision and put pressure on young people to marry early.

Ideas about the consequences of child marriages and early births

Regardless of the stated attitude towards child marriage, when talking about the "damages" or "benefits", the respondents consciously or unconsciously try to distance themselves and prefer not to talk about themselves, but about "other families", and often the damages are referred to with phrases, sounding like a memorized response.

The damages are understood by the respondents who firmly declare a reprehensible attitude towards child marriages and state their personal position:

- Dropping out of school, Roma girls remain illiterate. They usually stop studying, often before the wedding itself. Dropping out of school is completely ignored by respondents from all gender and age groups in Stolipinovo.
- Deprivation of access to work and profession, poverty and lifelong financial dependence of the girl on her husband and/or mother-in-law. With early marriage, the girl loses her right to choose, her right to development and future realization: "*She has already raised 3-4 children and now she is looking for a job, but she still has to take care of her house and children without any help with the household. At most, she would become a cleaner or sweep the streets...*" (Novi Pazar).
- Violation of the human rights of young people and, in particular, the right of choice of Roma girls are among the main arguments against early marriages in Lehchevo, Rakitovo, Tvarditsa. "*A woman needs freedom - to study, to live life, because after getting married, life ends.*" A girl must experience her childhood, "*there is time for everything, to experience the stages of life*".
- Children become parents: Lack of readiness for parenthood is cited as the main risk by all respondents. Mothers and grandmothers in Lehchevo believe that even 20-year-olds are not yet ready to become mothers, nevermind younger girls. However, many respondents believe that risks for the children are minimal, because "*the mother-in-law takes care of the children, and she knows how to look after children*" (Stolipinovo, Sredets, Rozino, Novi Pazar).
- Risks to the stability of the young family. Hasty child marriages often end with the separation of the cohabitants. Young people do not always know each other well enough before the wedding, not only when it is arranged between the parents, but even when the wedding is done to legitimize the relationship between the young people. "*If you marry early, you will divorce early*" (Rakitovo). Separation affects the children and the fate of the girl more severely - examples are shared of girls who have already changed two cohabitants before reaching adulthood. Most often, the mother takes the children. Sometimes the child remains in the father's family, and care is taken over by the mother-in-law, especially when the father cohabits with a new partner.
- Health risks of early births of child-mothers are not understood and made sense of by almost all respondents. Few are the participants who indicate the health risks and consequences of early marriages and early childbirths for the young bride and the child-mother.

Additional health risks for children arise in marginalized communities. Isolation inevitably leads to marriages between close relatives with severe consequences for the children – born with malformations, disabilities, hereditary diseases. Such cases were observed in Lovech, but the respondents did not recognize the health problem at all – they accept them as "something normal".

Respondents are definitely reticent to cite "**benefits**" of child marriages. The main unspoken "benefit" remains the certainty for the father-in-law and mother-in-law that they will get an "honest" bride, and the girl's parents are satisfied that they no longer have to worry about "how to protect the honour of their daughter." Exceptions were mentioned in the discussions when "child marriage saved the girl" from a worse fate in an extremely poor and broken family (Lehchevo). We should note that the conversation about the "harms" and "benefits" of child marriages did not take place at all with respondents for whom child marriages and early births are an acceptable traditional social norm (such as Stolipinovo, Lovech, Rozino).

4.3 What are the current trends registered in the survey

The field study found positive trends towards a decrease in child marriages and an increase in the usual age of marriage in a large part of the investigated neighbourhoods over the last 10-15 years. From their observations in their neighborhoods, the respondents in Rakitovo, Sredets, Tvarditsa, Novi Pazar, Lehchevo, Vidin are convinced that early marriages are decreasing and are now happening mostly among uneducated and marginalized families. There are still quite a few cases of early marriages, but they are in "*the poorer and useless families at the edge of the neighborhood*" (Rakitovo). According to the respondents in Samokov, even in this conservative Roma neighborhood "*now there are fewer early marriages than 10 years ago*", thanks to the change in the general situation - the work of men and some women in Sofia and the increased contacts with other Roma and non-Roma.

The usual marital age in the surveyed neighbourhoods is slowly rising. Cohabitation in childhood mostly affects Roma girls. As a rule, boys are married after reaching the age of 18, or as an exception at the age of 17, shortly before coming of age. In Rakitovo and Vidin, the age for cohabitation of Roma girls is gradually being raised. In previous years, a number of cases of underage brides, aged 13-14, were observed in Sredets, now they are an exception, but there are cases of 15-16-year-olds who give birth and drop out of school. A significant change is observed in Novi Pazar: for girls, the preferred age for marriage is 19-20 years (related to high school graduation), and for young men - 24-25 years, when they have settled down and have a job to support a family. In Tvarditsa, the usual marital age for young people also rises above 18 years, even a bride after graduating from university is no longer necessarily considered an "old maid". In Lehchevo they also shared that in the marginalized area "*there are still marriages at the age of 12-13, but they are rare*", but the age of young brides is also increasing there, influenced by the example of other families who live well, have jobs and their children marry after the age of 20, and some even later.

In some communities, the change is largely due to the long-term work of local Roma organizations (such as "Hayaci" in Novi Pazar and "Budeshte" in Rakitovo), to health mediators (Lehchevo, Rakitovo), to the provided social services for the prevention of child marriages in the community (Novi Pazar, Sredets, Tvarditsa).

Migration for work and better life abroad or in the larger cities of the country has a significant influence on the change in attitudes towards child marriages, which contributes to the breaking of social isolation, the adoption of behavioral models and, marriages delayed in time and reduction of the number of children in the family, accordingly. The change in Lehchevo is also due to the specifics of the Roma subgroup Tsutsumani, who try to resemble the Bulgarian community in terms of culture and lifestyle.

An exception to the general trend towards a decrease in child marriages is observed in Stolipinovo, Lovech, Rozino. In Stolipinovo, after the slight decrease in the first 10-15 years of the XXI century, the trend turns towards an increase in child marriages, including with minor girls under the age of 14. No change was reported in Rozino – girls continue to marry at around 15 and give birth early. In the investigated marginalized areas in Lovech, the usual age of marriage for girls is 14-16 years, and for boys – over 17-18 years.



Among which groups are child marriages most common

According to the field survey, in most neighbourhoods the practice of child marriages is most widespread among the poorest, uneducated and marginalized families/groups - Vidin, Lehchevo, Tvarditsa, Sredets, Rakitovo, Novi Pazar. In contrast, Stolipinovo is again an exception - child marriage is perceived as a common and acceptable practice among all social strata in the community. They do not happen just in the poorer parts of the neighborhood. On the contrary, the more affluent families also marry their children very young, as a mandatory rule for those from families "of the same status", in order to multiply their wealth. According to the observations of the field researchers, recently the highest proportion of early marriages in Stolipinovo is among the richest (such as goldsmiths) who use arranged marriage as a means of combining wealth and business.

Preferred number of children in the family and attitude towards the multi-child model

The field study confirms the steady trend towards fading of the multi-child model and a significant reduction in the preferred number of children among the Roma, especially among more educated and integrated families. Young respondents do not want to have more than one or two children, because **"it is difficult to raise more children and have them raised properly"** (Novi Pazar), *"children should be satisfied"* and parents should be able to study and work, as well as "have spare time" (Lehchevo). In Stolipinovo too, respondents prefer to have 1-2 children *"so that they can give them everything"*. Among marginalized groups, a desire for a maximum of 3 children is declared. In the studied communities, large families are rare, mainly in extremely poor areas of deep marginalization and they receive a judgmental attitude from the respondents with the arguments that these families cannot raise so many children and ensure a normal future for them.

Statistical data show that after the sharper decrease in the number of large families at the end of the 20th - beginning of the 21st century, in recent years, in Bulgaria, it has remained in relatively constant parameters, with a slight upward trend. According to Eurostat data, households with 4 or more children in Bulgaria in 2013 were 2.4% of all households with children, in 2016 they were 2.1%, in 2020 – 2.5%, and in 2022 – 2.6%¹⁵. The field workers' observations suggest that the number of large families with four or more children is slowly decreasing among the Roma.

4.4 Child marriage in pre-modern social norms in closed Roma communities

The concept of marriage and family is key to understanding the phenomenon of child marriages in isolated Roma communities. In pre-modern social norms, cohabitation on a family basis was considered marriage. As a rule, a couple that has an intention to or already has sexual intercourse is perceived as a family - the couple has already married and is expected to have a wedding and children. Announcing the cohabitation in front of the community with a big wedding or a modest celebration is most important to legitimize the couple as a new family.

Cohabitation or civil marriage? Until 1989, a large number of Roma were forced by the authorities to sign a civil marriage, but even then, cases of cohabitation on a family basis were not just a few. After 1989, the share of families living in cohabitation without a civil marriage has steadily increased as a whole in Bulgaria. The statistics take into account the growing high share of families living in cohabitation - according to NSI

¹⁵ Eurostat data https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvph05/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc_lv.ilc_lvph

data for 2020, 59.6% of the total number of live births were born outside civil marriage, in 2022 this percentage increases to 59.88%.¹⁶

The field study confirms that among Roma neighborhoods, declaring marriage to the community is still more important than an official civil marriage. "*When the drum is heard in the neighborhood*" the couple becomes a family. Accordingly, the final separation is also announced to the community and then the couple is perceived as "divorced". The conclusion of an official civil marriage is practiced among integrated Roma families living in a mixed environment as much as among the majority. In the Roma neighborhoods, in the last 7-8 years, there has been an increased tendency among migrants to have a civil marriage with the motive of taking advantage of family social benefits and exemption from certain taxes in the EU countries.

Church marriage is mostly practiced among Protestant and Muslim communities. Unfortunately, as the field research shows, some clergy in Roma communities tolerate or turn a blind eye to child marriages. In Stolipinovo, the Khojat/Imam blesses the marriage with a ritual in the family's home without worrying about the age of the bride. In some Protestant communities, the understanding of marriage and family depends on the personal opinion of the pastor, which does not always coincide with the official position of the church. For example, pastors in Lovech and Rozino openly approve of child marriages. In contrast, the pastors in Samokov criticize them, and the pastors in Rakitovo categorically condemn child marriages and do not allow these families into the church.

Family patterns and hierarchy of authority in the family

The strict distribution of roles and duties by gender and age among Roma is typical of the norms in pre-modern traditional societies. In the simplest form, Roma men represent the family outside in the majority, they are responsible for the income, feeding the family, providing a home and solving the "main" issues, and women bear the responsibility of the household and raising the children.

The traditional authority and power of the mother-in-law is a key factor in decision-making for the family. In all studied groups, both female and male respondents admit that as a rule, "*mothers-in-law rule the household.*" The young family, as a rule, lives with the husband's parents, the mother-in-law "*takes over her daughter-in-law and she becomes a slave in the house.*" Respondents suggest that, apart from as a kind of guarantee of the girl's virginity, early marriage is preferred by mothers-in-law, because the child-daughter-in-law will easily and uncomplainingly obey the mother-in-law (Stolipinovo). "*Mothers-in-law want a younger daughter-in-law to mold her as if she were made of plasticine and command her,*" shared men in Rakitovo.

In the extended household, the young daughter-in-law acquires decision-making rights only after she marries her own son and becomes a mother-in-law herself. Her new status in the household is firmly established after her daughter-in-law gives birth and she becomes a grandmother. Then her mother-in-law - the "old" one, little by little gives her the leading role, but her opinion continues to be respected in the important decisions related to the children and the household. Such a family model completely excludes the independence and the autonomy of the young family and places them in a dependent role on the father-in-law and mother-in-law in terms of housing, finances, work/business decisions, education, child rearing. Parents, and especially mothers, have the power to decide when and whom their children will marry, and therefore bear the "primary blame" for child marriages.

¹⁶ NSI data <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2963/живородени-брачни-и-извънбрачни-по-области-общини-и-местоживеење>



In the studied communities, the pre-modern family model is preserved in a particularly pure form among the millets in Stolipinovo, including because of the large number of the compact population, which has become an economically and socially self-sufficient community that marries and lives inside the neighborhood, communicates only in Turkish and watches only Turkish TV, including news from Bulgaria.

A typical family pattern among the millet group in Stolipinovo. Here, the girls are married early (at age of 13-15) and they stay at home to raise children and support the household together with their mother-in-law, and often with the old mother-in-law of the mother-in-law, who is frequently around 45-50 years old. Households often have 4 generations.

According to the male respondents in Stolipinovo, it is mothers, not fathers, who make decisions about children's weddings, the boy's mother chooses her daughter-in-law disregarding the relationships and feelings of the young. The daughter-in-law is not perceived as a person, the mother-in-law chooses her according to the girl's family/lineage and "*as an accessory to the family*" - to be virgin and pretty when dancing next to the mother-in-law at weddings in the neighborhood. She will then say to her son, "*There, this is the woman for you,*" and usually does not meet with an opposition. The future mother-in-law (the mother of the boy) negotiates the wedding first with the future other mother-in-law - the girl's mother, most often without asking the young people, and then the fathers can be involved in the negotiation. Usually the girl is 13-14 years old; often they announce the "engagement" and the girl goes to live with her future husband's family or stays for a while with her parents, but in both cases, she is suspended from school "to protect her honour". It is important that the child brides are virgin at the wedding and immediately give birth, so that it is clear that they are not damaged - "childless".

The field study found that **this family pattern gradually broke among the relatively integrated families in the communities studied.** As the modernization process progresses, traditional roles and power hierarchies in the family are transformed. The absolute authority of mothers-in-law is gradually being diluted with the understanding that "*young people have the right to choose their lives.*" Some respondents report that in their communities, it is now becoming acceptable for young people to choose their partners, the cases of young families living separately into independent housing outside the direct custody of their parents are becoming more frequent. Such opinions were expressed by the young respondents (Novi Pazar, Lehchevo, Rakitovo, Tvarditsa, Sredets), some parents fully support them, while others state with resignation that "*young people no longer listen to us.*" "*It used to be different, everything depended on the elders, but it's not like that anymore.*" In the more isolated groups, the authority of the elderly is not questioned by either the young or the older respondents (Stolipinovo, Samokov, Rozino).

The traditional social norm of girl virginity as an essential element of the pre-modern family model is extremely persistent in isolated ethnic communities. This is also the most sensitive issue on the subject of child marriages. It should be noted here that the moral value of this norm is by no means underestimated, but it leads to extremely unacceptable and harmful consequences for the fate of Roma girls and young women. Premature marriage to "save the honour" of girls deprives them of education, autonomy and choice of future. And humiliation and rejection from the community condemns non-virgin child brides to prostitution, poverty, human trafficking.

Due to the preserved tradition of virginity of the girl, in the isolated communities, as a rule, the couple having a relationship is perceived as a family, both by the parents and those around them, and by the young people themselves. "*If the young get together in one house - be it a tent, or a shack, it doesn't matter, it's already a wedding - it's a marriage and they immediately have children*" (Rakitovo). Even when the girl is "stolen" without her consent, she is considered already married, regardless of her opinion and wishes. Roma girls usually accept the situation, faced with the alternative of being branded as "fallen women" with no chance of starting a family in the future. "*When that happens, no respectable family in*

the neighborhood will take her as a daughter-in-law" (Novi Pazar). "*The girl's honour is a law*" and no one dares to break it.

The strict social norm of virginity applies only to Roma girls and does not affect boys. "*A man is a man and he can do what he wants. It doesn't show on him...*", but "*a woman should know her place*". This inequality is commented on by the participants only when a question is explicitly asked. It is not perceived as discrimination against Roma women and is rarely questioned, according to what the respondents shared about the social norms in the segregated communities. Without criticism or condemnation, some respondents report the differences between their community and others – Bulgarians, Turks and others, where virginity norms are no longer generally accepted. "*When young people live together, for Bulgarians it is not a marriage - they get on with their lives and development, but for us - Roma it is a wedding*" (Rakitovo).

The customs of proving the honour of the bride are known by all generations and continue to apply, but the most humiliating forms of direct observation are now the exception. Confirmation of virginity is usually made public in the community, most often through the *horo* (the chain dance) led by the mother-in-law waving the bride's shirt (a custom also typical of the pre-modern Bulgarian family). And due to the upgraded communication habits, in some places they announce the result of the first wedding night through Facebook with videos and photos. In some communities, these customs are now rarely observed, and less strictly. "*These are ugly things - the flag (the stained shirt of the bride) is a shame and humiliation*" (Lehchevo). But even when the check is done more discreetly within the family, the women then share with each other and eventually everyone learns.

The "negative" result continues to be made public in most communities. The "dishonourable bride" is punished with humiliating and violent customs – such as returning the bride to her parents and being paraded around the neighborhood in disgrace, sometimes mounted backwards on a donkey (North Western region) or with a string of red chillies around her neck (Novi Pazar). In some families, they no longer return the "damaged bride", but all her life, she suffers the harassment of the mother-in-law and the nagging of the family (Rakitovo).

The girl's family also perceives the violation of the virginity norm as their own disgrace, which often prevents the other daughters in the family from marrying into a "respectable family." The same respondents - women and men - share that they want their daughters to study, but in case of risk or suspicion of violation of virginity, child marriage is the mandatory solution. Accordingly, for parents, the protection of their daughter's honor is the condition without which early marriage cannot be prevented. According to the respondents, the control and upbringing of daughters by their mothers and knowing "*how to protect themselves*" are most important (Rakitovo, Novi Pazar, Lehchevo, Sredets).

However, extremely restrictive measures are also practiced: a complete ban on contacts with their peers, parents lock girls at home without developing their ability for self-control and their skills to take care of themselves. Parents stop the girl from school "*so that she does not get stolen or run away with someone*" (Stolipinovo). With the pride and conviction that they are doing everything in her interest, such parents do not understand that dropping out of school is detrimental to the girl's future, her job opportunities and her chance at autonomy in life. What was shared in the field study also suggests hidden attitudes of some parents, hinting that child marriage is the best solution in order to comply with the virginity norm. For the girl's parents, "salvation" is in the earlier marriage of the daughter "while she is a virgin", and for the boy's parents – it is a kind of guarantee that the younger the bride, the more likely that her honour is preserved.

The study registered **exceptions and tendencies towards a departure from the norm of the bride's honour**, which testify to intensified processes of modernization. Among the young Roma in Tvarditsa, premarital relationships no longer necessarily mean the creation of a family, the social norm of virginity is

respected, but it is already dying out and they do not return the bride if she is not a virgin. According to the girls in Rakitovo, due to migration abroad, "*observance and respect for virginity is beginning to decrease*" - it is important "*for the music to be heard, and then the young people will do what they want*". According to the respondents, in Lehchevo, "*the norm of virginity is already in the past*", "*the generations are already different*".

Early births - traditions and risks

Respondents confirm that child marriages almost inevitably lead to early pregnancy and teenage births. An accepted norm in the premodern community is for the bride to give birth in the first year after the wedding. "*The mother-in-law wants grandchildren, and the bride must prove herself fit to give birth.*" After the wedding, the pregnancy and expected birth of the young bride is a regularly discussed topic among the women in the neighbourhood. The girl's mother also contributes to the preservation of this social norm - she prepares her daughter to try hard and expect a quick pregnancy. From the perspective of young brides, early birth is an important decisive step in the daughter-in-law's struggle for status in the new household - the newborn baby gives her the higher status of a mother and a chance to participate in family decision-making.

Childlessness syndrome

The daughter-in-law who has not been able to get pregnant immediately after the wedding faces extremely serious problems with severe consequences for these girls. In Stolipinovo, the mother-in-law shamefully return her to her parents as damaged goods, without thinking at all that at 14-15 years of age, the girl has not grown up and has not even developed physically yet. Men share a subdued displeasure with mothers-in-law and grandmothers' insistence on the birth of a child soon after the wedding, but do not object to the expulsion of the childless daughter-in-law, as "*they have no say in these matters.*" Childless girls are completely deprived of a future, they cannot remarry because they are marked as "already used" and "defective - unable to give birth". Health awareness about the risks of early pregnancy is extremely limited or completely absent in isolated communities. The question of health factors that the child bride might not be old enough to conceive usually surprise and trouble respondents, except for health mediators and social workers from the community who participated in the survey.

Respondents' perceptions of violence in child marriages

According to the field researchers, the respondents generally do not accept **the understanding that child marriage itself is violence, even when the girl has expressed consent to cohabitation**. Respondents with higher education and social status, however, identify as violence not only physical violence, but also the violation of the right of young people to having a choice, especially girls.

The specific cases cited by respondents as overtly violent marriages are related to buying brides, parents' decision to marry their children off for their own benefit, and violence and harassment within families. Harmful practices of "**buying girls**" for brides were recorded in two of the studied locations. In Lovech, buying an underage virgin bride is a common practice in the marginalized community and costs an average of 4,000 to 7,000 BGN. For them, this is not a problem, some even share their outrage not at the act itself, but at the fact that recently "*the most beautiful girl in the neighborhood has been bought by outsiders and has already left their neighborhood.*" In Lehchevo they report such cases in the marginalized area, where "*Roma immigrants from Berkovitsa still do it*" (and the "price" is from BGN 700 to BGN 2000), but much less often lately.

The marriages, which are arranged by the parents, are also a form of forced marriage for young people who do not know each other, but obey their parents despite their personal feelings and wishes. According to respondents, in most locations, these cases are decreasing, and where they are practiced, arranged marriages are not recognized by parents as violence against young people. In Samokov, the respondents



did not claim that there were many arranged marriages, but they shared about "*conversations between families*", in which their pastor often participated. In Stolipinovo, arranged marriages happen mainly between wealthy families who choose their daughters-in-law according to their family's wealth and authority. In such situations, marriages between close relatives often happen "in order to keep the wealth in the family", and in the extended family. Poor parents – there and in other communities studied – also seek to arrange their children's marriages in order to "*place their daughter in a better, richer family*" or to "save" their son from marrying a "fallen girl". In both cases, however, the parents are convinced that the arranged marriage is in the best interest of their children, and completely fail to recognize the violence in it, and ignore the risks to their children's future.

Early pregnancy and early birth are rarely recognized by respondents as a violence. Roma girls are the biggest victims of child marriages, but in some locations, this is not recognized as a risk at all by either the girls or the parents (Stolipinovo).

4.5 Concepts of success and life fulfillment

Concepts of the future, notions of success and life strategies of the young people in the isolated Roma communities were explored in the course of the field study through direct questions to the young respondents and through the analysis of indirect information shared in the comments on other topics. The questions to the younger generation are mainly focused on education, professional realization, the place and time of starting a family in the desired future.

What is the life planning horizon in the studied communities?

The field study expectedly registered significant differences within the neighborhoods between isolated Roma communities in general and the internal marginalized micro-zones in terms of identity, community belonging, values, including the life planning horizon. Among the respondents in the communities, planning concepts and practices are formed depending on education, occupation and income, integration in the modern world with parameters that are similar to the variations within the Bulgarian communities. Whereas for marginalized families and groups, planning, if any, is only short-term "day-to-day" - until the end of the day, or at best until the end of the week, and questions about the more distant future are most often met with surprise, silence and embarrassment. The horizon of life planning is both a prerequisite and a consequence of the marginalization of the group, the families, the community. As other analyzes show, among the factors for deepening of marginalization, along with poverty, are the attitudes to live day by day, the extremely limited horizons for realization, the dominance of the so-called ghetto culture.

However, the life strategies and planning attitudes of the Roma communities in general are also influenced by one specific factor that significantly distinguishes the Roma from the majority and from other communities in Bulgaria and Europe - the average life expectancy. The most long-term planning usually covers the wishes and dreams of what one wants and expects to achieve in one's family and in one's development for the rest of one's life. Expert opinions and calculations on life expectancy for Roma in Europe claim that it is at least 10 years lower than the average.¹⁷ Demographic indicators in Bulgaria also show that Roma live significantly shorter lives compared to other ethnic groups – Bulgarians, Turks and others. According to the 2021 Census on the age structure of the population by ethnic self-determination: old people aged 65+ are 7.3% of the people who declared Roma identity, compared to 25% of the

¹⁷ Brussels, COM (2011) 173/4 Communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions. An EU framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020. p. 6.

Bulgarians, 19.8% of the Turks and on average for the country – 23.5% of the people who answered with regard to the issue of ethnicity.¹⁸ Compared to the 2011 Census, these data register a certain trend towards an increase in the life expectancy in Roma communities over the past 10 years, but the gap between Roma and the macro-society is far from closed. These age characteristics are also visible in the profile of the respondents. The majority of interviewed grandparents are aged 45-50+ years with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, with a few exceptions, respondents aged 70+ participated in Rakitovo.

Due to the shorter life expectancy, the perception of age is different in Roma communities. Over the age of 50, Roma already perceive themselves as old people, behaving, dressing and thinking about themselves as old people who have already lived their lives; this perception is particularly pronounced among women. Accordingly, the maximum life planning horizon shared by the respondents is up to the age of 50-55 years. It also objectively predetermines the neglect of pension insurance among the Roma, because the majority do not believe that they will live to retire. At the same time, the perception of age indirectly fuels the tolerance of child marriages through parents' expectations and desire to "*see their grandkids grow up and dance at their wedding.*" Parents expect to marry off their children early – while they are "still strong", and are able to earn income, so that they can get them married and can take care of the young family. And before turning 50-55, parents also want to see their grandchildren get married - a wish that is a hidden but powerful factor in maintaining the tradition of early marriages.

Perceptions and dreams for the future of young Roma

The place of education in the concept of the future.

Respondents' opinions on the importance of education are divided between recognition and ignoring education as a value and resource for the future realization of young Roma. The field study registered differences in opinion between the younger and older generations, but deeper differences between families in the studied communities emerged depending on the degree of social exclusion and isolation. In more closed communities and marginalized groups, opinions that openly deny the benefits of education have not been heard, but the respondents simply omit (forget or ignore) it when talking about the future of young people.

Education among young people in Tvarditsa has gradually become a value and respondents talk about the benefits of "*being literate and being able to develop*". Young people generally have a desire for education, they go to school and some continue to study at universities, they dream of solid professions – such as doctors, teachers, administrators, business. In Novi Pazar, both girls and boys share that "*to succeed, you have to be educated.*" It is important for them to finish high school, but they dream of a university for their future children. In Sredets, young girls and boys share that they "*have high goals*" for education and profession. They do want to finish secondary school, get a driver's license, and most of the girls want to continue studying higher education to become doctors, psychologists, teachers. Both parents and young people in Rakitovo state that most children "*have self-confidence and motivation to study*", "*girls want proms for prestige*".

Successful practices of continuing education after early marriage are shared in Novi Pazar, Tvarditsa, Lehchevo. Although isolated, these cases are a positive practice in limiting the severe consequences of early marriage for young people.

In many cases, however, the boys' dream of a completed education goes only as far as the first level of secondary education (10th grade), after which they have the right to a driver's license (Lovech, Novi Pazar,

¹⁸ NSI. Ethnocultural characteristics of the population as at September 7, 2021. page 4. Census2021_ethnos.pdf

Sredets, Stolipinovo, etc.). In Lovech, Roma girls and boys do not share any dreams for the future beyond money, a nice car, they have no idea of planning their lives, and the creation of a family is an expected event according to the decision of the parents and the deal between them. In Rozino, young people are unable to name their goals in life, they want to get married and stay in the village.

Education, however, is definitely absent from the plans for the future in Stolipinovo - it is not mentioned at all by either the parents or the young people. Among affluent families, the involvement of teenagers in the parents' business completely demotivates them to study. The girls don't always admit it openly, but the message is clear: a 16-year-old girl who earns good money, has a car, "*what else will I do if I go to school, I'll just lose money every day...*" (Stolipinovo)

Regarding the choice between child marriage and children's education, parents who are critics of child marriages state a desire for better education for their children, for girls to complete secondary education, and to study at university. At the same time, however, even among these parents, attitudes are also registered that they are willing to put up with child marriages and sacrifice the girls' education and future for the sake of protecting their daughters' honor.

Ideas for professional realization, the migration in the dreams of young people

According to the field study, the ideas of young Roma about professional fulfillment are quite limited and unclear, most of them are poorly informed about the various professions and evaluate them through the prism of the desired high incomes. Here, we must also consider the influence of dominant preferences of communities for insecure but better-paid "piecemeal" occasional work, at the expense of the relative security of an employment contract, offering the same or lower earnings against fixed-hour work and compliance with labor discipline.

A high salary is the main criterion of young people for their dream job in Novi Pazar - success for them means good income, not so much a prestigious job, which shows a low horizon of ideas about personal development and a limited understanding of the opportunities for professional realization. In Sredets, Roma girls and boys studying in secondary school share realistic dreams of developing a small business. Everyone wants to become financially stable before having children and families. In high-migration communities, young respondents expectedly dream of going abroad "*like everybody else*" and "*being well there*", but most of them do not have a clear idea of what they will do abroad other than the expectation and dream of buying a "nice car".

Wedding, marriage and children in the dreams of young people

A wedding and the creation of a family have their essential place in the dreams of young people. Although in this field study this topic was largely displaced by questions about education and desired occupation, in a number of interviews and studies, Roma girls talked about their dream of being the princess of the wedding with beautiful dresses, decorated with gold and at the head of the *horo* (the chain dance).

According to the observations of the field researchers, the girls in Stolipinovo pretend not to want to talk about it, but dream about the wedding and do not show any desire to oppose their mothers or future mothers-in-law. They are prepared by their mothers to be servants in the home of their future husband, to help him in business, and do not associate their future with education or any profession at all. The single prospect instilled by the mother of the daughter being prepared to be a servant in her husband's house naturally closes the dream horizon of these girls until the wedding – the princess at the center of the great celebration, not thinking of it as the beginning of the other life of a servant in the house of the mother-in-law.

In summary, the observations of the field researchers are that the dreams shared by the young respondents are very limited, and most young people generally do not share dreams and are limited to



dreams of material gains - to go abroad, have a nice car, have a lot of money. Due to the many and diverse issues to be discussed in the relatively short time for the focus group discussions, the field researchers suggest that the information collected about the dreams of young people is likely to be fragmentary and incomplete. It reflects differences in the desires of boys and girls for education, but does not allow for the claim that, in general, Roma girls have more limited ambitions. However, the actual personal fulfillment depends not so much on the children's wishes as on the community and family environment, poverty, insufficient skills and self-confidence to communicate outside the neighborhood and other internal/external objective factors that limit the opportunities for development in the closed community. Undoubtedly, systematic work should also address the attitudes of the parents to stimulate their children's thinking in the same directions, or at least not to counteract and return their children again and again to pre-modern models of family, behavior and life strategies.

4.6 How to put a stop to child marriages – respondents' views

The question of how to limit and put an end to child marriages is definitely difficult for the respondents, so they most often tell about specific cases of their relatives or neighbors. There are few specific suggestions received on how and what can be done, but the respondents seem to be aware that child marriages are entirely up to them, to the people within the community. The **community authorities and public opinion within the neighborhood** are recognized as a powerful factor in supporting or opposing changes in family patterns.

Within the context of family patterns and power roles, the respondents indicated **the responsibility of parents and the family environment** in the first place. *"The environment and the family are the most important to have or have not child marriages"* (Lehchevo). The key factor are the mothers-in-law, and accordingly, the change must start with them, which is also confirmed by the practical experience of the community work programs of the "Hayaci" association in Novi Pazar. Parents should teach their children to plan: *"the girl should have a plan for her life, and if she has a boyfriend, the girl should see what his plan is, and whether she likes it, because boys are often users too"* (Rakitovo).

The role and opinion of **young Roma** is also mentioned as an important factor. With few exceptions, young people themselves are critical of child marriages, stating that they do not want to marry young, but without the consent of their parents, they are in danger of repeating the pattern again. In addition, many of them do not have dreams, do not see alternatives to early family formation and do not think about the future. Young respondents also clearly report the persistence of traditions, including the social norm of virginity, which are difficult to overcome. *"Tradition is in the blood and we cannot erase it by force"*, therefore *"change happens slowly, it takes time"* (Rakitovo). According to parent respondents from more integrated families, the decision for their children's future depends on the young people's desire and ability to develop and realize themselves in life, and parents should support and encourage them.

Respondents do not show high expectations regarding **the role of institutions, legal measures and sanctions**. The dominant opinion is that the institutions do not do anything, but the parents - critics of child marriages insist that the State must react proactively against cases of child marriages, especially for underage Roma girls; and that even stricter punishments from the State against child marriages are needed - *"substantial fines and punishments"* (Rakitovo). Some respondents insist on prison as well for the parents on both sides and for the husband (Novi Pazar). However, the "advocates" of child marriages do not recognize child marriage with minors as a crime at all, but perceive the sanctions as a tax, a fine. They use their awareness to circumvent sanctions both in Bulgaria and in emigration (Stolipinovo).

Positive comments on the **role and impact of social services** were received in several locations where Community Support Centers (CSCs) or Roma NGOs provide mobile services directly in Roma neighborhoods - such as the CSC and Hayaci Association in Novi Pazar, the CSC in Sredets, the Badeshte



(Future) Foundation in Rakitovo. The mobile team at the municipality of Tvarditsa "*has helped a lot*", but has not been working for some time and the consequences of the interrupted support are already being felt in the neighborhood.

According to respondents in Rakitovo and other locations, **education is very important to reduce the number of child marriages**. The younger people seek support outside the family in the school with examples of how "*their teacher believes in them, motivates them and helps them when they have a hard time, helps them set goals and achieve them*" (Sredets). Education is also important to those who have already married young. Respondents in Sredets appeal to **educational institutions** to provide a second chance to adults and young mothers who have dropped out of school, to complete their education.

5 The extremely difficult problem "children give birth to children" – The legal framework

The connection between early marriage practices and the observance of children's rights seems obvious, but is rarely commented on by the responsible institutions, although the Bulgarian state has obligations under the relevant international human rights treaties. Bulgaria has ratified the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as other international treaties for human rights. In this sense, the discourse of children's rights emerges as an important consideration in all child-related policies.

5.1 Principles and norms for the protection of children's rights in relation to early marriages

This paragraph analyzes the legal norms, principles and regulations for the protection of children's rights in Bulgaria, which may find application in terms of overcoming the problems with early marriages. The criminal law aspects of the legislation are described in detail to provide social workers with the information they need to respond to child marriage - about the legal provisions and about the institutions that have the competence to enforce the law.

In the Bulgarian legislation, there are norms aimed at limiting cohabitation with minors, as cohabitation with a person under the age of 16 is a crime. "Selling" / receiving a ransom from a parent or other relative in order to allow a female person under the age of 16 to live as a couple is also criminalized, punishment is also provided for the one who gives the ransom. Sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 14 is considered a crime, regardless of whether the child participated voluntarily or not. Legal provisions also pursue parents when it comes to forced cohabitation or marriage or obtaining a ransom for a cohabitation permit and/or marriage of a girl under 16 years of age.

The provisions of the Family Code state that only civil marriages concluded in the form described in the code create the consequences that the law associates with marriage. Thus, not only the different religious and culturally determined rituals and practices, but also the newly created "cohabitation" does not create any valid legal consequences. Marriage can only be concluded with mutual and free consent between a man and a woman – who have reached the age of 18, given in person and at the same time in front of the appointed official in the relevant municipal administration.

Until the end of 2023, the law provided for an exception to the general rule - a legally recognized marriage was possible with a person who has reached the age of 16, only if important reasons require it. For the conclusion of such a marriage, permission from the District Court was required. With the latest amendments to the Family Code of 22 December 2023, this legal option has been abolished. How the



repeal will affect those public relations will be determined by law enforcement and the development of public relations. After this change, early civil marriage with minors is no longer possible.

5.2 Child's rights

In fulfillment of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and as a fundamental domestic normative act for children's law, the Child Protection Act is in force since June 2000. It regulates the rights, principles and measures for child protection, the responsible state and municipal bodies and their interaction in the implementation of child protection activities. According to the provisions of the Child Protection Act, every child (person under the age of 18) has the right to protection for normal physical, mental, moral and social development and protection of his rights and interests (Art. 10).

It is clear from the national regulations that, although not directly aimed at early marriages, the Bulgarian legislation creates conditions for their prevention. Responsibility for the implementation of the relevant legislation is given to different institutions. How they work, how they interact and how they truly respect the best interests of the child determines the extent to which this harmful practice - early marriage - can be overcome and allows for the equal and fair development of every child. Unfortunately, early marriages are still present in closed Roma communities. A problem that should seek a solution by undertaking complex measures, including overcoming educational and health deficits among children. Most often, in the presence of circumstances, measures are applied to protect children's rights, which are measures for protection in the family environment and measures for protection outside the family.

The Bulgarian legislation does not allow civil marriage with minors. However, there are practiced early cohabitations with minors and it is precisely to prevent them that the efforts of the state and the society should be directed. The coordinated efforts of all involved state institutions in cooperation with the local government together with the non-governmental organizations are needed to deal with this extremely serious problem where "children beget children" in order to improve the outlook for minor parents and their children, as well as to take appropriate measures to prevent early marriages/cohabitations.

6 Interventions and services for prevention of child marriages

As part of the desk research, a quick review of the available experience in the provision of social services and programs in Bulgaria and several European countries was made. Both budget-funded centers for social services and projects of Roma and pro-Roma NGOs that address these risks and work for community development are covered. The available experience abroad has been collected through an online survey, which is certainly not comprehensive and covers a part of the projects implemented in this field - the published information is often partial and, moreover, it is not always available in English. The survey cannot in any case be perceived as a comprehensive evaluation of the existing services provided by the social system and by NGOs. An in-depth evaluation requires a different methodology, tools and resources, which are not foreseen in the project either as a task or as resources of time and people.

6.1 The experience of the social services in Bulgaria

The social services in Bulgaria are analyzed in more detail, presenting the opportunities outlined by the Law for Social Services to ensure outreach support and prevention through the newly defined "social service community work" and the generally accessible "mobile preventive community work", which can be provided by state-delegated centers for social services. These newly introduced services open up new opportunities for work, addressing the risks of social exclusion of people and isolated communities and the needs of widespread prevention of child marriage.



Nevertheless, the state-delegated complexes for social services are still working mainly on open cases of the Child Protection Departments with underage mothers, girls at immediate risk of child marriage or already cohabiting on a family basis. Considerable experience has been gained in this area and results are being achieved, but essentially the intervention of social services here is reactive, after child marriage is already a fact and all the risks for the future of the girl and her children born from the child bride are in place. Broad prevention services and community work to change attitudes towards pre-modern family models are currently almost non-existent except for individual providers who have developed project-based services. Serious experience in prevention programs and innovative mobile services to support children and families from distinct ethnic communities has been gained by the pilot Family Counselling Centers built with the support of UNICEF Bulgaria in two districts - Shumen and Montana. Within the framework of the international EU project "Guarantee for the Child", this experience has been further developed and expanded in 7 new municipalities. At present, only some providers still continue the community work and social inclusion programs in isolated Roma communities, others have abandoned them, absorbed in the routine of the casework.

As well, the efforts to deliver child marriage prevention services in practice face diverse constraints and challenges in terms of discrepancies in the planning procedures, the lack of methodologies and tools for community work, low capacity and understanding of the specific approaches for prevention of child marriages in isolated communities. Expert observations in different regions of the country are alarming that the content, philosophy, approaches and methods of community work are too poorly known both at the expert level in the administration of social services and at the level of social workers and specialists who should provide it in target communities.

6.2 What challenges are faced by the professionals in social system in Bulgaria

The information from the desk research is supplemented with two focus groups with professionals from the social system, as well as with the direct observations of project experts who know the activities of a number of social service centers in the country.

From the perspective of professionals, the main challenges stand out in several areas related to the quality of social work in vulnerable communities and field work, the adequacy of methodologies and approaches to work with family and community, the human factor – qualifications and attitudes of social service staff, available resources, coordination within the social system and interaction with other systems/sectors. Throughout the heated discussions, the respondents finally agreed that:

- Community outreach work is the key tool to achieve results in child marriage prevention. The quality of social work directly depends on the relationship of trust between social service professionals and service users.
- The social service centers do not have sufficient resources for mobile work on the ground in the ethnic communities. If this approach is accepted as a state priority in the social work, it is necessary to provide the needed resources, in particular – personnel for community work.
- It is necessary to work with the whole family, not only with children at risk - underage mothers and their children or girls at risk of child marriage.
- The support should be long-term, not short and sporadic. *"The word 'long-term' is the most important, regardless of which risks for children and young people are being talked about. It is something that cannot be done without, and at the moment the statutory package of prevention services is too limited in scope and duration."*
- The human factor in the system – the social workers or professionals who work with people – is cited as a challenge and obstacle to quality social work. The respondents referred not only to the knowledge and skills of the professionals, but also to their attitudes: *"there are many professionals*

who work in the system without being prepared to work with people and especially with vulnerable Roma and ethnic communities. They have no approach, they carry racism, they work against the system and this slows down the process and hinders the work".

- The involvement of Roma in social service teams is useful – it is important to return the initiative to appoint Roma women and men who can have an impact on the community in order to have a greater effectiveness of social services.
- A negative factor is that the social system does not work in good coordination and communication with the educational system. The different sectors and systems should work as a team and all institutions should work with one goal. The needs of children and their parents are very complex and it is important that all systems are involved and that their roles and responsibilities are clear. Everyone must cooperate in its' own sphere in order to take a comprehensive approach to risks.

The main form of prevention implemented so far by social service providers is information meetings in communities, where parents are introduced to the legal framework and criminal liability in cases of child marriage and early births. Outside of information campaigns, broad-based prevention of early marriage is not advocated by social service providers who work on cases, but there is similar experience in NGO work and the projects, implemented by UNICEF Bulgaria.

6.3 Initiatives and projects of civil organizations in Bulgaria and in Europe

Fighting the phenomenon of child marriages and early births is undoubtedly a priority, especially among Roma and pro-Roma civil organizations that systematically work for community change and emancipation of the Roma community. In Bulgaria, there are projects and local initiatives, realised by Roma NGOs and focused on the fight against child marriage and community change, which were analysed during the desk research.

The quick overview of the available experience in several European countries has shown the the problem of early marriages has not yet been solved anywhere. Depending on the different priorities in social policies and the specifics of the socio-economic environment, in different countries work is done with different intensity and commitment of the institutions, social services, NGOs and other interested parties. The specific local dimensions of the early marriage phenomenon also largely determine the diversity of response measures, services and approaches.

The situation with child marriages in the Roma communities in Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania is similar to that in Bulgaria, the child marriage is prevalent mainly among the poorest, low-educated and marginalized Roma communities. In Hungary, these are the Roma who live in villages, without access to services and information - about 60% of Roma women in poor rural communities gave birth for the first time before the age of 18, and 60% of them were girls who were younger than 16. Data on child marriage among urban Roma, as well as in the middle class among Roma, do not differ from Hungarian averages. In the other countries, both rural and urban Roma communities are suffering of the early marriages and births phenomenon. As of 2017, 6.7% of girls aged 15-19 in Romania are already married, and 34 out of 1,000 teenage girls have given birth to children¹⁹. In Slovakia, as of 2011, early births by girls aged 15-19. are 22 per 1000 of the same age group; according to the experts, the main part of the girl-brides is from the Roma community²⁰. The data from 2023 report that in Serbia, child marriage affects 56% of Roma girls

¹⁹ <https://www.romania-insider.com/girls-romania-mothers-young-age>

²⁰ https://www.gutmacher.org/fact-sheet/adolescent-pregnancy-and-its-outcomes-across-countries?fbclid=IwAR3kD1lb-Qw7lxc7dy2OWYr8ZlqOEj00ZaEj6dWm1_j-j6Oiw538wCm_h8k



under the age of 18. Even more alarming is the fact that 16% of Roma girls get married before their 15th birthday and 5% have a child at the same age.²¹

In these countries, initiatives to improve the educational level, civil and health literacy among Roma communities, familiarization with human rights and protection against discrimination are the main tools for social inclusion and gradual reduction of child marriage. The feedback from Roma NGOs in European countries confirms also the conclusions of the field study in Bulgaria about the need for systematic community work to change attitudes and prevent child marriage.

Unlike these countries, the problem of child marriage in Spain covers not only the Roma, but much wider population groups, as well as migrant and refugee communities from countries outside Europe. The high number of child marriages in Spain is due to the low age limit for marriage with consent of the girl/boy and court permission - only in 2015 this age was raised from 14 to 16. That's why the phenomenon of early marriages and births goes beyond the scope of Roma inclusion policies. A number of Spanish NGOs work for prevention of child marriages with girls from the mainstream society, including the Roma and migrants, implementing programs for education, health literacy, human rights, motivation for development and professional realization, as well as increasing the sensitivity of society to the risks of child marriage.

In Germany, cases of child marriage are observed mostly among large migrant communities from developing countries and Turkey, as well as among Roma migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria. The authorities in Germany rely primarily on the effectiveness of the strict application of the law and the measures of the social services, an effectiveness that is also recognized with respect by the Roma migrants. But in recent years, new opportunities for social integration of migrant Roma have been sought by adapting approaches borrowed from the respective countries and communities.

The accumulated experience, know-how and resources of the GirlsNotBrides²² global network partners from programs and initiatives in developing countries are also analyzed for possible adaptation to the situation in closed ethnic communities.

The review of the gained experience shows a wide and diverse typology of methods and activities, which are analyzed from the point of view of the methodology for the prevention of child marriage, which is developed within the framework of the project "Dream Up, Aim Up". A key priority of Roma and pro-Roma organizations is education, which is considered the main engine for the inclusion of Roma communities, for the development and overcoming of pre-modern family models. The access to professional qualification and employment, the health education and family planning are also essential components of services and programs for overcoming premodern family patterns. The integrated approach should be applied in various areas of interventions and support to all generations in isolated Roma communities. The systemic and long-term community work, discussions and community meetings with different age groups of parents and young people are key to changing attitudes towards family patterns and broadening the scope of dreams for the future of young generations.

²¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/serbia-to-label-child-marriage-as-human-trafficking/>

²² <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/>



7 Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Summary of conclusions from the field study

Child marriages are rooted in the belated modernization of the closed Roma communities as a result of social isolation and tendencies towards self-segregation from the macro-society, which contribute to the preservation of pre-modern family models and social norms, behavioral models, notions of success and personal fulfillment of the people within the community.

Premodern family patterns continue to enforce the practice of child marriages and early births, the strict hierarchy of authority in the household, and the dependence of the young on the older generations – those of parents and grandparents. Of key importance is the still persistent traditional social norm of girl virginity, which in most cases displaces the best interest of young people for personal development and professional fulfillment. When the "honour" of the girl and the family is at stake, the preferred choice of parents, and often of young people, is usually early marriage over education and prospects for future fulfillment in life.

With the understanding that **child marriage is not a "typical Romani tradition"**, characteristic of the Romani identity, but **is characteristic of pre-modern societies in general**, the following factors are deduced from the field research, which should be addressed by services/programs for the prevention of child marriages and early births in isolated Roma communities:

- **The social isolation** of the segregated Roma communities, the discrimination and the rejection of the Roma by the majority have a negative impact on the self-confidence, self-esteem and desire for development of the young Roma. Life alternatives are confined within community/neighborhood boundaries. Isolation and self-segregation form a web of dependencies: of the individual – on the family/household, of the household – on the social support networks within the neighborhood. These dependencies make the public opinion in the neighborhood dominant for the behavioral patterns and life choices of the individual. Accordingly, young people and their families consider and measure their decisions through neighborhood public opinion and community assessment, which relegate macro-societal norms and values to second and third place.
- Social exclusion generates **complex problems and risks** for young people, families and communities in all spheres of life – education, employment, health care, housing conditions, participation in public life and decision-making, etc. Complex risks are superimposed in detached ethnic communities due to poverty and social exclusion – they influence each individual risk by multiplying it manifold and making its resolution dependent on other risks and circumstances in the life of the family.
- **The multidimensional vulnerability of Roma families in marginalized areas** - in the so-called "ghetto within the ghetto" who are doubly isolated and discriminated against by both their community and the macro-society. Marginalization in the most vulnerable families further increases the complex risks. In the conditions of extreme poverty and double social isolation in the areas of the "ghetto within the ghetto" basic living conditions and resources are lacking that are available to other families in the community. When the model of permanently unemployed parents is repeated in two or more generations, the children's lives lack the example of regular employment, every day with working hours. Permanent unemployment also means permanent exit from the Bulgarian-speaking environment, interruption of communication with the macro-society, which affects the motivation for education and attitudes towards integration. Without a

horizon for the future and without support, children are in danger, if not doomed, to cut themselves off and repeat the pattern of their parents and "sink" into the spiral of marginalization.

- **The dominance of life strategies for survival** instead of strategies for development and personal fulfillment due to poverty, low education and illiteracy, impaired access to employment and income-generation opportunities. The weight of survival priorities alters parents' perceptions of children's best interests.
- **The language barrier** and difficult communication with the macro-society due to the insufficient command of the Bulgarian language by parents and children in some isolated communities.
- **Limited health literacy** and awareness of family planning, the health risks for girls of cohabitation and childbearing.
- **Discrimination** on the part of the majority continues to fuel the attitudes of the isolated community towards self-isolation and mistrust, layered over decades, towards those external to the community - institutions, service providers, professionals. And this makes it difficult to adequately assess the risks and often blocks the building of trusted relationships with the users, necessary in the provision of social services.

The field study supports the hypothesis that isolation conditions the persistent adherence to social norms of premodern traditional family patterns, including child marriages and early births. The intra-family power hierarchy and the role of the mother-in-law in decision-making about the young family/children in many cases predetermine the preservation of harmful parenting practices and outdated models of upbringing, takes away the rights of the mother to choose and make decisions for the children, for her education and future of the family. Internal social networks, dependencies and mutual influences within the community help the survival of individual families, but at the same time they are a significant factor that threatens the results of social work aimed at changing attitudes and behavior (of parents, families, children). For the effectiveness of programs and services, it is necessary to take into account the specifics and the impact of living in a closed community on social norms and parenting practices.

These and other factors distinguish the work with socially excluded families and communities from the support to families in a relatively called "standard" situation - families that are not subjected to the constant pressure of the closed community environment. Practice shows that under this pressure risks make an easy return.

The conclusions of the field study fully confirm the need for innovative approaches, specific services and activities for broad prevention throughout the community. Targeted support to overcome social exclusion should create a more favorable socio-economic and community environment in order to change attitudes, phase-out pre-modern family models and overcome the existence of child marriages among Roma.

7.2 Recommendations to the methodology for prevention of child marriages

Specificity, scope and focus of services:

Reducing and phasing out child marriages and early teenage births require **systematic and long-term community work to address the complex risks and factors that sustain these harmful practices in isolated ethnic communities.** A network of partner social, health and education services needs to be developed to work in sync to support the isolated community.

According to the Social Services Act, the complex intervention to reduce child marriages can be provided through a complex for social services, which includes the generally available service mobile and preventive community work (Art. 12), as well as specialized services (under Art. 15), such as information and counselling, advocacy and mediation, training for the acquisition of skills, and social service community



work. Municipalities can form targeted units/teams within existing centers or from newly created social service complexes with targeted programs to vulnerable communities. Such services can also be provided by Roma and pro-Roma civil organizations that work directly in the target communities.

Based on the findings of the field study, it is recommended that **the social services, community work and programs be structured in two major directions:**

Pathway 1: Broad prevention of child marriages, targeting:

- Change of attitudes in the Roma communities towards pre-modern family models and social norms, which would form a favorable community environment in order to interrupt the repetition of the pattern of child marriages by the new generations. Systematic work with children and families - support for new thinking about life planning, rational understanding of the vision for future realization and motivation for education and professional qualification.
- Promotion of alternatives for personal fulfillment, attitudes and skills for a meaningful and rational choice, which will shift child marriages in the priorities of children and adolescents from the segregated ethnic communities. Provision of support to achieve the desired education and professional realization, development of motivation and practical skills of adolescents for personal fulfillment - how to turn their dream into action.

Pathway 2: Support for adolescent girls and young men already cohabiting early, aimed at:

- Addressing risks for children born in the young family and developing the parenting skills of the young parents, prevention of violence.
- Minimizing the negative consequences of the child marriage for the young parents with a special focus on Roma girls through flexible programs for returning to education, developing personal skills, access to employment, etc. Health literacy and family planning services aimed at preventing early births and at least delaying second births by the child-mothers.
- Work with the girl's new family and the entire household to emancipate the young family from the power of the mother-in-law, by gradually getting out of dependence on the older generation; developing the responsibility of the young people for the care and future of the family, asserting independence and taking responsible decisions about their lives. Support for the young daughter-in-law for her emancipation as a mother and member of the household.

The profile of staff in social service complexes that work to prevent child marriages implies: (a) a multi-ethnic team that includes people from the community; (b) a multidisciplinary team of community workers, social workers and a nurse, supported by other specialists such as psychologist, pedagogue, lawyer and others. Implement clear requirements and standards for the selection and performance of staff, including health mediators and social workers to support service delivery.

Target groups for the interventions and support services:

Pathway 1: Broad prevention of child marriages. They include not only girls at risk of early marriage and their families, but also the whole community, regardless of the degree of risk in individual families. Interventions should reach all generations and all segments within a particular ethnic community. Even when young people think differently, their behavior and choice of a model for personal fulfillment depend directly on changes in the attitudes of parents, the family community and on social norms within the community environment.

- **The young generation – Roma girls and boys who have not yet entered into early marriage / cohabitation**, included in targeted programs for different age groups, as well as depending on their coverage in school. Roma girls who drop out of school or attend school irregularly are the most at-risk group for child marriage and early pregnancy. The critical age for preventing child marriages

among girls is different, depending on the usual age of marriage and specifics in the respective community.

- **The older generations in the community, for whom efforts must be made to change attitudes towards pre-modern family models, specifically:** The parents of adolescent girls and boys with a special focus on mothers - future mothers-in-law for the bride and mothers-in-law for the groom; The "old parents" (grandparents) who "by right" in many cases make decisions in the household about the future of the children and young people;
- **The authorities in the community/village,** who (a) can be won over as "agents of change" in support of child marriage prevention interventions or (b) can become overt or covert opponents and even "enemies" of changing attitudes and behavioral patterns in the closed Roma community;
- **Maximally wide circles in the neighbourhood,** addressed directly through the programs and/or indirectly through the secondary impact of "agents of change" within the community.

Pathway 2: Target groups for support provision to Roma girls who have entered into child marriage/cohabitation and to underage mothers. Several main target groups are outlined here:

- **Girls at immediate risk of early marriage** for whom the wedding has been arranged but has not yet taken place. They can be identified through mobile fieldwork in communities and the proposed early-warning mechanism for risk of child marriage.
- **Minors and underage girls who have entered into early cohabitation** and live in their husbands' families;
- **Minors and underage pregnant women and young mothers, as well as their children,** with special attention to those who have been abandoned by their birth family and are not accepted into the husband's family
- **Parents of adolescents in early marriage and extended families** with special attention to mothers-in-law and mothers of girls.

Recommended approaches for community work for widespread prevention of child marriages:

- **An integrated approach** to address the complex causes and community factors that create risks for child marriages. In parallel, support to families is needed to overcome social exclusion through education, employment, health services, etc.
- **Proactive approach** – mobile fieldwork in communities and mapping to identify early risks and needs in families before the worst effects of child marriage and early births mark the lives of girls and young men.
- **Ensuring the direct participation of ethnic communities.** Change in attitudes and social norms takes place within the community and can be provoked by agents of change from within the community itself. The policies and activities of institutions, including social service centers and schools, which are external to isolated communities can create the conditions to support the process, but cannot lead it inside the community.
- **Broad prevention requires mobilizing the community's own potential for change** by engaging key community actors as agents of change. Changing attitudes and behavioral patterns must come from within the community itself to have an effect. This happens on two levels. First, by including people from the community in the team. Second, by bringing in key actors from the community to work towards changing attitudes by reaching a very wide range of people of different generations and social strata. Gaining allies as agents of change is part of prevention interventions and services (by working with mothers-in-law, community leaders, role models from successful women and men, local leaders, pastors, activists).
- **Specificity of support, adapted to the situation and specifics of the particular community:** Support services and programs should be adapted by assessing the specific risks, problems, needs



and opportunities of the individual, the family, the community. Mapping as a method of gathering information about risks can be extended to family patterns and ethno-cultural codes in the community.

- **Program approach** – in essence, the program approach represents a systematized intervention to overcome specific problems and a specific response to the identified needs of the risk groups. A programmatic approach facilitates the structuring of child marriage prevention interventions with a clear focus on connecting activities to the objectives and expected outcomes in the target communities. The broad prevention should cover the whole family and its social environment in the community. At the same time there is a need to work on changing ideas about the future and what real opportunities for development young people have in their life.
- **Continuous broad prevention programs** – continuous and systematic work in the community is mandatory to achieve results. Changing attitudes require time, constant and sustained impact in closed communities and especially in areas of extreme marginalization. (As experience in community development has shown, it is possible to take the person out of the ghetto, but it takes a long time to take the ghetto out of the person.)
- **Multisectoral approach, partnership and interaction** of the social, healthcare, education system, justice and administration - including schools, health institutions, police and prosecutor's office, local authorities, etc. in the planning and implementation of social services and child marriage prevention programs.

7.3 Recommendations to institutions for improvement of policies and measures

The effective prevention of child marriages is a community-based intervention, but it requires also the engagement of the state institutions and local authorities for ensuring the needed resources and support. The conclusions of the research have indicated the need of:

- Establishment of new centers that provide the social service community work. Municipalities should be encouraged to open them as a unit to existing complexes for social services or as independent centers.
- The Agency for Social Assistance, which is responsible for the planning of social services, should include the social service for community work in the annual update of the National Map for Social Services, encouraging municipalities to plan and develop them.
- Municipalities should support Roma and pro-Roma organizations that work in their communities to prevent child marriage with or without project funding.
- The school can take on a new role as a partner of social services in the implementation of programs for the early prevention of child marriage.
- It is necessary to create a system (mechanism) for early alarm and response to cases of child marriage. This currently exists only in the case of early pregnancy - in the case of birth, which is late for prevention, and is absent in the case of establishing cohabitation with minors.
- The contribution of NGOs as service providers to the quality of support to at-risk groups has been proven during the years. In terms of services for prevention of early marriages and births, the engagement of Roma and pro-Roma NGOs as social service providers or engaged partners is of utmost importance. They could more painlessly overcome the existing barriers of mistrust in the closed ethnic community and provoke a change in attitudes towards sensitive issues related to family models, social norms, behavioral practices, life strategies.