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Dream UP Aim UP Project
**Integrated Community-centered Services for Prevention of Child
Marriages of Roma in Bulgaria**

Deliverable 3.4:

English summary of the Toolkit

Toolkit

For Prevention of Child Marriages among Roma Communities in Bulgaria: Methodology and Tools

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

The Toolkit is structured in 8 chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction: purpose and objectives of the Toolkit
- Chapter 2: The child marriages in isolated communities – problems and risks
- Chapter 3: Why targeted interventions are needed to stop child marriage in segregated communities
- Chapter 4: Opportunities for community work and broad prevention, provided by centers for social services in Bulgaria
- Chapter 5: Community work and programs for wide-scale prevention of child marriages
- Chapter 6: Provision of intensive family support in cases of child marriages
- Chapter 7: Networking and creating partnerships in support of community work – methods and steps
- Chapter 8: Annexes, including analysis of the legal framework and documentation



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The English summary briefly presents the justification, the innovative approaches and methods for social work, and the opportunities for applying the new techniques and prevention programs within existing social services regulations in Bulgaria. The structure of the full version of the Toolkit is followed to a great extent, only some parts are summarised and merged for brevity. All the topics are outlined in detail in the full Bulgarian version of the Toolkit^[1] (71 pp.).

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1 Introduction: Purpose and Objectives of the Toolkit

This Toolkit 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". 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 detrimental 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 organisations in Bulgaria.

The Toolkit was designed by a joint working group of experts from the project partners - C.E.G.A. Foundation - Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives, Zakrilnitsi (Protectors) Association and Roma-Lom Foundation.

The methodology is developed based on the conclusions and recommendations of the qualitative study on current trends and attitudes towards early marriages, conducted in 10 isolated Roma communities, which outlines the contents and the essence of the social and community work, targeted at the prevention of child marriages and early births in Bulgaria. The conclusions from the legal framework analysis and the review of good practices and lessons learned from services and projects in Bulgaria and some European countries have also been used. The comprehensive report on the results of the qualitative field survey¹ and the book "Dream Up, Aim Up: The Challenges of Combatting Child Marriages in Bulgaria"² (Sofia, 2024, published in Bulgarian), are delivered to professionals as a knowledge resource for understanding the specifics of the problems and the meaning of the proposed approaches for support and prevention services.

At the same time, the technology, structuring and organisation of the social services, proposed in the Toolkit, are based on the Methodology for the Provision of the Social Service Community Work (SSCW), developed and tested within the framework of the UNICEF Bulgaria project - European Child Guarantee (ECG) pilot project, Phase III of the preparatory action of the European Commission, funded by EU. The C.E.G.A. Foundation provided training and methodology support to teams in 7 pilot municipalities.

The Toolkit was supplemented and updated with the recommendations from the testing in 6 locations: from the Community Support Centers in Novi Pazar, Burgas, Kazanlak and Montana and in the work of NGOs –

¹ Full report in Bulgarian: <https://cega.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Summary-Report-DreamUp-Field-Survey-BG.pdf>; Summary in English of the detailed report: Child marriages – a challenge and barrier faced by young Roma in Bulgaria: <https://cega.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Summary-Report-DreamUp-Field-Survey-EN.pdf>

² Book - Мечтай Смело, Цели се Високо: Предизвикателствата пред борбата с детските бракове в България. София, 2024 <https://cega.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Summary-Book-DreamUp-BG.pdf>; English summary of the Book: "Dream Up, Aim Up: The challenges of combatting child marriages in Bulgaria" <https://cega.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Summary-Book-DreamUp-EN.pdf>



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from the Roma-Lom Foundation and the Badeshte Foundation in Rakitovo. Roma girls, boys, young men, parents, and grandparents have been directly supporting during the test of community-based prevention programs and innovative tools. After analysing the results and recommendations from the testing, the Toolkit was consulted with social service professionals and finalised for application by social service centers and NGOs.

The purpose of the Toolkit is two-fold:

1. To contribute to ending child marriages in Bulgaria by equipping the professionals of the social system with a community-centered methodology, knowledge resources and skills for the protection of violence and prevention of these harmful practices in isolated minority communities.
2. To create conditions for better access of Roma girls and young women to new development opportunities by introducing innovative community-centered support for:
 - (a) encouraging Roma girls to dream, aim and work for personal achievements beyond the borders of isolation and changing attitudes to pre-modern social norms in excluded Roma communities;
 - (b) Mobilising the internal potential of communities to overcome the attitudes and pre-modern family models depriving Roma women of personal and economic autonomy.

The Dream Up Aim Up Toolkit is supplemented with practical tools, knowledge resources and documentation, forming a methodology package for social services and community work to be used by service providers and professionals, Roma and pro-Roma NGOs, health and educational mediators, youth workers, education and youth institutions, applying targeted programs for prevention of child marriages. The experts at both national and local institutions can apply suitable methodologies and knowledge resources when planning and establishing social services and prevention programs. The long-term benefits of applying a methodology will be for isolated Roma communities in Bulgaria, with a special focus on Roma girls/women and Roma youth, who will receive more competent services and community support from trained professionals in the social system and civil society organisations. The special focus is on Roma girls and young women – living in isolated neighbourhoods, who are conscious and/or unconscious victims of the harmful practices of child marriage and early pregnancy, and girls at risk of falling into the trap of early marriage.

2 Child Marriages in Isolated Communities

Early marriage occurs in almost every region of the world. Every 3 seconds, somewhere, a girl under 18 marries. "Early marriage" refers to any union in which one or both partners are younger than the legal age of marriage. Wherever it occurs, early marriage is a harmful practice that violates the child's fundamental rights to a healthy life, education and security. 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 among the EU countries, Bulgaria continues with a relatively high share of early births to mothers under 18.



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The Toolkit methodology is based on the understanding that child marriages are not a "typical Roma tradition" characteristic of the Roma identity, but are general characteristics of pre-modern societies and pre-modern family models, as a whole. From this point of view, the experts are convinced that ending the practice of child marriages and early births in no way affects the essential Roma identity, and 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 European societies in earlier times. In today's Bulgaria, they are still mostly preserved among segregated ethnic communities due to belated processes of modernisation, decades of social exclusion, spatial segregation and isolation from the macro-society. Often, people from Roma communities recognise 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, and central and local institutions.

At the very beginning, let's specify the **term child marriage**, which is used in the Toolkit to avoid the risk of misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations. 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 harmful practices 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.³ Since December 2023, any form of child marriage below the 18 age is prohibited by the law in Bulgaria. Here we use the term 'marriage' for cohabitation on a family basis, which according to traditional social norms in isolated communities is accepted as marriage after it is announced and legitimised before the community by the parents and/or the newlyweds.

2.1 Context – summarised conclusions of the qualitative field survey

Child marriages are rooted in the belated modernisation 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, behavioural models, notions of success and personal fulfilment of the people within the community.

Pre-modern 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 fulfilment. 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 life fulfilment.

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**

³ 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>



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** harm the self-confidence, self-esteem and desire for development of the young Roma. Life alternatives are confined within community/neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood. These dependencies make public opinion in the neighbourhood dominate the behavioural patterns and the individual's life choices. Accordingly, young people and their families consider and measure their decisions through neighbourhood 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 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 marginalised areas** - in the so-called "ghetto within the ghetto" who are doubly isolated and discriminated against by both their community and the macro-society. Marginalisation 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, and 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 marginalisation.
- **The dominance of life strategies for survival instead of strategies for development and personal fulfilment** due to poverty, low education and illiteracy, and 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 communication difficulty with macro-society** are due to the insufficient command of the Bulgarian language from parents and children in some isolated communities.
- **Limited health literacy** and awareness of the family's planning, and 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. This makes it difficult to adequately assess the risks and often blocks the creation of trusted relationships with the users necessary for providing social services.



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- **The field survey fully 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, taking 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, at the same time, they are a significant factor that threatens the results of social work aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour (of parents, families, children). For the effectiveness of programs and services, it is necessary to take in advance 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 support to families in a relatively "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.

2.2 Recommended approaches and methods for ending the phenomenon of child marriages

Reducing and phasing out child marriages and early teenage births requires 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 educational services needs to be developed to work in sync to support the isolated community.

The findings of the field study show that services for support and prevention of child marriage should cover not only adolescents and young people, their parents, but also the community in which they live. It is necessary to reach out to parents first, especially to parents of young Roma girls. Interventions and support should be specifically focused on the different target groups. 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 favourable community environment 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 realisation and motivation for education and professional qualification.
- **Promotion of alternatives for personal fulfilment, attitudes and skills for a meaningful and rational choice, which will shift child marriages in the priorities of children and adolescents from segregated ethnic communities.** Providing support to achieve the desired education and professional realisation, development of motivation and practical skills of adolescents for personal fulfilment - 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 young families and developing the parenting skills** of the young parents, prevention of violence.
- **Minimizing the negative consequences of child marriage for 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 the second birth of 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 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 of 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 if young people think differently, their behaviour and choice of model for personal fulfilment depend directly on changing parental attitudes, family community and community-based social norms.

The young generation – Roma girls and boys who have not yet entered into early marriage/cohabitation are 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 behavioural 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:



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- **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 the 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.

Recommendations for approaches and methods in social and community work include applying good practices in social services with sensitivity and understanding of the specific social and ethnocultural context in supporting segregated ethnic communities. The experience of organisations working on projects targeting marginalised communities and continuous fieldwork is also used to create methodological guidelines and implement them in a working environment.

Reducing and gradually eliminating child marriage and early adolescent births requires systematic and long-term community work to address the complex risks and factors that sustain these harmful practices in isolated ethnic communities. Such services can be provided by social service centers established with state-delegated or project funding, also by Roma and pro-Roma civil society organisations working directly in the target communities.

3 The Need for Targeted Interventions to Stop Child Marriage in Segregated Communities

3.1 Nature and scope of child marriage prevention in isolated communities

In the first place, the results of the field survey fully confirm the need to introduce and expand the preventive approach in the regular practices of the social system in Bulgaria. Prevention is neglected in practice, although foreseen in the guidance for various social services, both at the central levels of planning and funding the social services and at the local level of direct service provision. Social service centers should be encouraged to invest in preventive activities and programmes. They are used in work on serious risk cases and often neglect the need to intervene before the situation becomes serious. Ending child marriage can only be achieved through systematic and long-term prevention interventions. It is necessary to prioritise the services and programs for the prevention of child marriages and early pregnancies, provided by state-delegated centers and NGOs.

The specifics of risks impose **the need for additional approaches, specific services, activities and programs for broad prevention throughout the community**. Targeted support to overcome social isolation should help create a more favorable socio-economic and community environment for changing attitudes, the demise of pre-modern family models and overcoming child marriages and early births among isolated Roma and other ethnic communities.



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It is important to emphasise here again that **the target group of innovative services is not the Roma community in general, but the isolated Roma and other closed ethnic communities, where pre-modern family models and social norms still prevail**. It is these excluded communities that should be covered by intensive programs to overcome the "pre-modern", for the broad prevention of child marriages. From this perspective, the retreat from the pre-modern family model and the ending of the practice of child marriage and early births in no way affects the essential Roma identity, will only help the transition from a pre-modern traditional society to the opportunities for development in the modern world.

What are the goals and objectives, what does the prevention of early marriage mean? It is not a random phenomenon it **requires a change in the family model and affects the entire community**. Unlike the macro-society, where this phenomenon is unacceptable, both for girls in child marriage and for their family and relatives, in pre-modern communities, this is an acceptable social norm for the community. If in the macro-society a child marriage can appear as an individual, single case and it is possible to work with the known approaches, then in the isolated pre-modern community the case affects the entire community and is fueled by dominating pre-modern social norms. Naturally, the social workers still work individually, but the change can become sustainable only if the basis of the social norms of the entire community is affected. Intensive support is needed. Usually, the Child Protection Departments and social workers interfere only in case of immediate risk or when cohabitation and childbirth are already a fact. However broad prevention before the emergence of an immediate risk/threat is also necessary to prevent child marriage.

The support services and prevention programs will be designed following the pathways, outlined in the previous paragraph.

3.2 Specific approaches in response to the specifics of risks

The Toolkit for prevention of child marriages outlines methods and approaches, recommended by the research conclusions and the analysis of the experience of social services.

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 replication of child marriages:** The harmful practices of child marriage, existing in isolated communities, can only be systematically addressed through an integrated approach, as their existence has been largely determined by social exclusion, discrimination and stigma against Roma. In parallel, support for families is needed to overcome social exclusion through education, employment, health services, etc. In socially excluded closed communities with multiple vulnerabilities, interventions and support are needed to address the complex risk factors for children and families across all sectors and aspects of life, not just those where visible risks are already present.
- **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 isolated ethnic communities:** Change in attitudes and social norms takes place within the community and can be provoked by agents of change from within the



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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. Social and other public service professionals need to improve their effectiveness by including representatives of the ethnic communities they support in their teams.

- **Broad prevention requires mobilizing the community's potential for change by engaging key community actors as agents of change:** The impact of changing social norms and pre-modern family models is a long process. Changing attitudes and behavioural 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, and activists).
- **Specificity of support, adapted to the situation and specifics of the particular community and Roma sub-group:** Support services and programs should be adapted by assessing the specific risks, problems, needs and opportunities of the individual, the family, and the community. Mapping as a method of gathering information about risks can be extended to family patterns and ethno-cultural codes in the community. The initiators and implementers of the programs must be aware of what problems they will encounter during their work.
- **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 lives.
- **Long-term broad prevention programs:** Continuous and systematic work in the community is mandatory to achieve results. Changing attitudes requires time and constant and sustained impact in closed communities 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.)
- **Taking into account the specific pattern of community authorities who form opinions and make decisions in isolated pre-modern communities:** Interventions should be designed to reach all generations and segments within a given isolated ethnic community and include all generations. Even when Roma girls think differently, their behaviour, career and life choices depend heavily on the attitudes of parents, relatives and the social norms of the community.
- **Gaining allies among authority figures within the family/household:** Intensive and ongoing work with families and communities, focusing on the “power structures” and decision-makers in the household who have an impact on adolescents’ futures, is essential. This work is key to changing



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attitudes and practices in family models and overcoming traditional social norms that condone child marriage and early childbearing.

- **Multisectoral approach, partnership and interaction of the social, healthcare, education system, justice and administration:** Cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, 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. Schools are an important factor, they can help young people have a broader vision of the future, they can help them shape real dreams and introduce them to the world outside the neighbourhood and beyond their norms. Together in teamwork between the centers for social services and schools with a focus on young girls and their mothers as a target group, the prevention is more comprehensive and more effective.

4 Opportunities for Community Work and Broad Prevention, Provided by Centers for Social Services in Bulgaria

According to the Social Services Act (adopted in 2020 and forced since January 2022), the complex intervention to reduce child marriages can be provided through a complex of 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 the **social service community work**. Municipalities can form targeted units/teams within existing or newly created centers complexes for social services with targeted programs for vulnerable communities. Such services can also be provided by Roma and pro-Roma civil organizations that work directly in the target communities.

The Social Services Act took an important step forward in addressing the needs of socially excluded Roma communities by approving “social service community work” as a state-delegated activity. Over the years, community development work has been implemented by many Roma and pro-Roma NGOs. Since 2012, targeted outreach services and prevention programs for the most vulnerable families with children at risk have been tested as project-based pilot models by UNICEF Bulgaria. However, this service is new to the social system and needs methodological support and capacity to be established and operational. The accumulated experience is slowly being integrated into the practice of social services.

4.1 Social Service Community Work

The social service community work is established as a specialized service under Art. 15 of the Social Services Act. The comprehensive methodology of the new “social service community work” providing social services in the community has been developed and tested in 7 pilot municipalities with funding and capacity building within the framework of the European Child Guarantee project, implemented by UNICEF in Bulgaria (2020 - 2023). There is good progress in implementing the main approaches for field support to families with children at risk on the ground inside isolated ethnic communities, but the methodology still needs to be promoted and introduced in the country. The Dream Up Aim Up Toolkit is promoting this methodology, as a relevant/feasible opportunity for introducing integrated community-based services and programs for the



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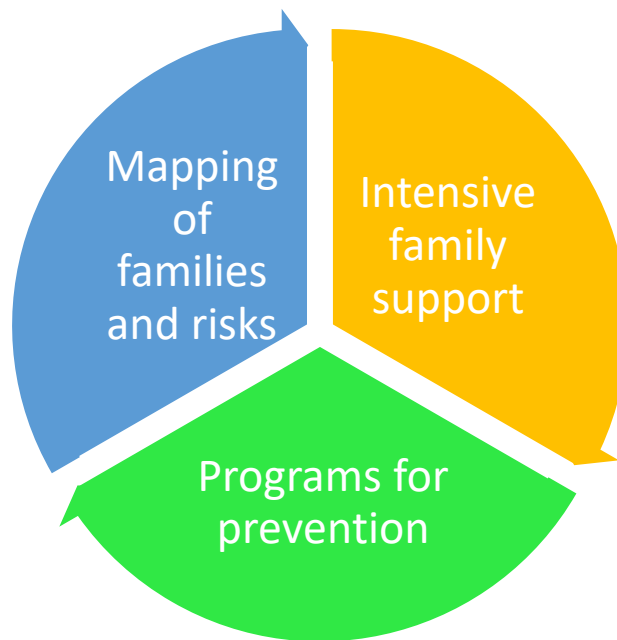
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prevention of child marriage in the practices of state-delegated social service centers (i.e. funded by the state budget).

The methodology of the social service community work defines it as a service that involves its users voluntarily, through the building of trustful relationships with the families. Unlike specialized services, it allows the service provision without a detailed assessment report, plan and contracting. However, the SSCW follows the same logic that is applied to the case management of users in specialized services, namely: assessing the family situation and identification of their vulnerability, risks and needs; offering timely and adequate support to their needs; including the child and the family in group activities and programs, appropriate for their needs.

The community work with vulnerable communities covers three stages of support: (1) mapping of the vulnerability of the family/household and its' members, (2) intensive family support to children and families at high risk and (3) programs for the prevention of risks in the vulnerable community, including the risks of child marriages and early births.

Cycle of the social service community work



Although defined as separate stages, this cycle is part of the daily work with the community and the processes within it occur simultaneously. The team is expected to maintain all three processes of community work in their daily support to the community, which leads to community development by reducing the vulnerability and risks to which people in it are exposed.

Mapping is the process of assessing the vulnerability of families (households) and children in the community and providing individualized support to them to reduce the risk to which they are exposed. It is carried out through mobile work of teams directly in vulnerable communities to collect information and identify children



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and families at risk. Based on the results of the mapping, a needs assessment is made and priorities are derived. From the assessment of the problems of the identified risk groups, their specific needs are derived - individual, family, group or community. On this basis, priority programs for services and activities in support of risk groups in the target community during the relevant period are determined and planned.

Intensive family support for children and families is provided in cases of established levels of medium and high vulnerability of a family or a child in it. This is in-depth and targeted work with the family/household to protect and overcome the vulnerability of its members, reduce the risks for the child/children in it and better include the family in the life of the community. Intensive family support is undertaken in cases of medium levels of risk in the family, and may also be part of cases with high risk for the child when this is coordinated with the Child Protection Department and providers of specialized services involved in the case.

Programs for prevention and support - development and implementation of programs that represent a complex intervention with the application of an integrated approach to solve the identified priority problems and to change the situation in families/vulnerable communities. Special attention is paid to the separate neighbourhoods in which excluded communities and groups live and to the isolated settlements on the territory of the target municipalities, where the problems are most acute, and access to services is extremely limited or absent altogether.

Programs are organized in individual and group formats. The programs involve not only families with medium and high risk but a wider range of families with no or low-risk inappropriate group activities and events. Part of these programs is the broad prevention of child marriage and early births. An essential component of the programs are activities to change attitudes and traditional social norms, which are preserved in separate ethnic communities due to generations of life in social isolation, segregation and discrimination which negatively affect the care of children and the development opportunities of young people. Community work to change attitudes addresses both the families covered in intensive support and their community environment, to ensure the sustainability of the results achieved from the support for children and families.

The scope of the services requires a broadening of approaches, and more innovation in work technology and service delivery to achieve the set objectives and priorities. In difference to other specialized services, wider target groups – children, adults, young people – are addressed, as well, it allows following the innovative approaches (presented above in Paragraph 3.2), including also:

- **Proactive approach** – in terms of open entry and access of users to services, it is applied to identify children and families with problems or at risk through on-site visits, visits to risky neighbourhoods, regular meetings with the community, etc. The team does not stand behind a desk waiting for the user to come to the office but goes to the at-risk communities to see the problems on the spot and provide them with services and support.
- **Large volume of outreach mobile work** for mapping communities at-risk and ensuring access to services for target groups from high-risk vulnerable communities and isolated areas, provision of services on the spot – in the family home and complex measures and activities for prevention at the community level.
- **Opportunities for fast reaction in case of established high risks** – providing support to users without referrals from the Child Protection Department in cases of children at risk. Depending on the problems, a referral may be issued at a later stage. Entry to the service is through mobile work and



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mapping of risk communities, needs assessment and, accordingly, a plan for support and impact on the entire family with a focus on the child at risk.

- The program approach for prevention of risks in isolated communities - tackling problems in the community, established in the mapping of the vulnerability of families and children and during the intensive family support to people with high levels of vulnerability.
- Family at risk case management – the case is not the single child, but the family/household at risk, where comprehensive services are provided for the entire family with a focus on children and youngsters, supported in the context of the family and community environment. In most cases, it is necessary to work with the entire household, when families live in a large household.

4.2 Mobile Preventive Community Work

The mobile preventive community work is established as a generally available service mainstream service under Art. 12 of the Social Services Act. It is provided without referrals and preliminary assessment of risks by the Child Protection Department or by the municipal office, without a contract signed by the user and the service provider. This social service is open to supporting a wide range of users.

The activities are organized into **programs for prevention and/or support of vulnerable individuals and groups** according to the identified (or stated) problems and needs of the community. The activities in a specific group or community (with similar problems) are planned and implemented within 4 months. The programs are implemented in the field, in the homes of the users, on the territory of public services and/or institutions and outdoors inside the community.

The mobile preventive community work also includes **awareness raising and information campaigns**, focused on separate topics, according to the identified needs in the community. The campaigns are carried out following a previously developed Plan for conducting field campaigns, including:

- a) Analysis of vulnerable groups and identification of their needs; collection of data, analysis of the needs and trends in the target community.
- b) Target segmentation, helping to tailor the messages and activities specifically to the needs and interests of each group: Identifying the specific groups of vulnerable people that the campaign will focus on. Various factors can be considered such as age, gender, social status, physical or mental experience, identity, place of residence, and more.
- c) Setting clear and measurable objectives for the campaign.
- d) Building partnerships and networks.
- e) Adequate communication channels, informative materials, etc.

4.3 Proactive approach to the identification of groups at risk: Mapping

The Toolkit provides a detailed explanation of all aspects of the mapping activities – approaches, profile of collected information, planning and organization, steps and activities, and documentation of collected information about the families. Here, we will present only the key points.



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The mapping is a substantial part of the activities of both community-centered social services - the social service community work and the mobile preventive community work, implemented more in-depth by the first one and in less detail by the teams of the second one. In the context of social, health, educational and other integrated services, identifying families and children at risk is not a separate service, but part of the preparation for service provision.

The purpose of the mapping is:

- Creating a database, profile of target communities, and understanding the specifics of vulnerable ethnic communities;
- Assessing needs and planning services;
- Planning and assisting in the implementation of programs aimed at target communities;
- Baseline information and data that can later be used to measure the effectiveness of programs/services.

The main activities for mapping the vulnerability of individuals, families and communities include: (1) Site visits and “walk-through” of at-risk communities to conduct group meetings, individual interviews, home visits to at-risk families/households and initial risk assessment; (2) Collection and synthesis of information from the network of volunteers and resource people based in the communities and subsequent site visits; Ongoing systematization of information from the walk-throughs of segregated communities. (3) Analysis and assessments of risks of families and communities following the scheduled procedures and documentation.

During the mapping process and subsequent visits to the families, risk assessments for the children/families and a needs analysis are prepared with recommendations for the forms and scope of the necessary support, which are included in the plan for inclusion in programs and specific services.

From the very beginning, we must clarify **the mandatory prerequisite for effective mapping – building trust between the mapping team of social workers and the community members**. The principles of voluntary sharing of information by the family and ensuring confidentiality of information are mandatory in the provision of social services, including community outreach services. The team states them to the family at every step: when introducing themselves to the family and introducing them to the possible services, when requesting consent for an interview and consent to keeping notes on the information.

Nevertheless, the practical experience confirms that the most effective tool for gaining the trust of people and families in an isolated ethnic community is the involvement of people from this community in the team. For that reason, we strongly insist on the multi-ethnic composition of teams engaged in mapping and service provision.

Wide scope of the studied risk factors and aspects in family and community life:

- Description of the household and the families in it with specific information about the household members and the family relationships between them with a special focus on children. For households with identified risks, a genogram is later prepared;
- History of the household/families – how many years have they lived in the neighborhood, belonging to an ethnic group/sub-group, position/authority in the neighborhood;



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- Housing conditions – size and conditions of the home, ownership and legalization, availability of basic facilities (water, electricity, sewage, bathroom, toilet, communications incl. internet);
- Education – do the children attend school or kindergarten, level of education of the parents;
- Employment and main sources of income, level of poverty, social resources in the family;
- Access to public services – healthcare (health insurance, family doctors of children and adults, immunizations, chronic illnesses), access to social assistance and social services; civil status (are there any family members without valid ID cards);
- Primary indications of possible risks – previous cases of child abandonment in the family, pregnancy, risks of child marriage, underage mothers or pregnant girls, school dropouts, disabilities and chronic illnesses especially in children, shared fears and problems in the family. Special attention is paid to risks of child abandonment, child neglect, and suspicions of violence.

What specific information from mapping will help identify the risks of child marriage and early births:

Developing programs to change attitudes and behavioural patterns in isolated communities requires significantly more detailed information not only about individual families but also about the community (neighbourhood/quarter) as a whole. Of high importance for child marriage prevention programs is the ethno-cultural profile of the community – ethnicity and sub-groups with their specifics: mother tongue, religion, self-identification (how they call themselves), dominant social norms and attitudes specifically regarding the care of children and young people, child marriages, early births, in which families such cases are most common, who usually makes decisions about children in the household, etc. In addition, programs for broad risk prevention in isolated communities should be tailored to the general situation in the neighbourhood:

- Location of the neighbourhood in the settlement, availability/distance from public services (municipal administration, school, GP and health facilities, Social Security, Labor Office, etc.), access to public transport;
- Population – approximate number of residents and households (with the comparison of different sources – according to official data /NSI, GRAO, Census/, according to municipal administration and mayor’s office or deputy mayor, according to residents of the neighbourhood), profile of the preferred type of migration, preferred destinations and approximate number of families/people who have migrated to larger cities or abroad;
- Housing environment – the condition of infrastructure, type of housing, the purpose of land in the neighbourhood, legalization, etc.;
- Relative degree of social exclusion according to: (a) level of communication, contacts between residents of the neighbourhood and the majority; (b) objective characteristics – unemployment rate, education, sources of income, health insurance and access to healthcare, etc., etc.;
- Identification of community leadership and activists in the neighbourhood; health, labour and education mediators, municipal councillors (if any), local NGOs, etc. This information is very important: first, to attract potential volunteers to the SWOR programs; second, to provide “entry points” to the community and especially to extremely marginalized groups and families; third, to identify the leading factors in forming public opinion in the neighbourhood, which respectively



predetermine the key target groups and audiences to which the programs for changing attitudes in the community should be addressed.

It is obvious that such diverse information about the community cannot be collected with a single visit to the neighborhood, but is gradually supplemented through data on individual households and in the course of the launched services. Unlike specialized services for children and families at risk, where only assessments of children/families are prepared, the social service community work requires analyses of the overall situation, risk factors and vulnerability in the mapped community/neighbourhood.

5 Community Work and Programs for Wide-scale Prevention of Child Marriages

5.1 The program approach in social services

The **program approach** is adopted to ensure the structuring of services and activities with a clear focus on the linkage between activities and expected results. The meaning of programming is in the practical benefits in terms of optimizing work and understanding the effectiveness of services for children, families and risk groups from vulnerable communities. In addition, the program approach stimulates a more flexible organization of work, allowing the development of more flexible services, with the possibility of change and adaptation according to the specific conditions in the given micro-community and the progress (or regress) achieved to date. A differentiated approach, considering the specifics of local communities, is mandatory in programs, community work and services. In general, a community approach means planning and implementing interventions for social change (services, support and programs) in the context of community specifics.

Unlike the well-known specialized social services for children and families at risk, **community work is essentially aimed at the overall development of the community itself, at a gradual and profound change in the community environment, in which children and families live. It is of key importance for the development and modernization of isolated closed communities, for their gradual exit from isolation from the macro-society, for their adaptation to the conditions of the modern world and the opportunities for improving the quality of life.**

Community-centered programs are designed to provide conditions for real and sustainable change towards improving the care of children in families by overcoming social norms, traditions, harmful practices, internal community hierarchies and dominant public opinion, which often become barriers to change in the individual family.

Community work in isolated communities can be applied in various areas - education, employment, family relations, human rights, living conditions, etc., but **in essence, it is focused on the motivation for development and change of attitudes towards life realisation.** In the broad spectrum of impact, community work is carried out through self-organisation of the community itself - by locally based civil society organisations and internal community agents of change. But in specific aspects, it can and should be implemented by social service centers, which should address in their work not only the needs of the individual



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user (child or family) but also the problem areas in their community environment, which shapes their attitudes and determines their motivation for change.

About marginalised zones inside isolated communities, the programs must consider the fact that long-term and even short-term planning of life and personal fulfilment is by no means a common practice for families in areas of extreme poverty and marginalisation. Accordingly, over time, expectations for achieving successes and benefits for the person/family are reduced to “right now”, without considering and planning milestones – achievements that can lead to success in the coming years. These attitudes become a barrier to personal development and require long-term social and psychological support for parents and young people to motivate and build basic life skills.

5.2 Designing a package of programs for prevention and support

The centers, providing social services community work and mobile prevention community work, should perform not only a single program but a package of programs, responding to the variety of community needs. The priority programs are identified through analysing the information from mapping, conclusions from mobile work, observations and visits to at-risk communities - assessments of the needs of families/groups at risk, as well as of the potential of the community for change.

Concerning the **technology of programming**, let's remember that in essence, the programs represent a systematised intervention to overcome specific problems and a specific response to the needs of a specific risk group or several risk groups identified during the mapping of vulnerable communities. Hence, the standard programming methods are followed, which ensure:

- Logical connection between the objectives of single programs with the main goals aimed at children and communities;
- Connectivity between the programs and complementarity of support to: (1) a given risk group in the community to solve various problems of this group through the various programs or (2) solving a problem through intervention on various target groups related to this problem.
- Focusing/differentiation of programs – by risk groups and by specific problem (or problem area), i.e. a given program doesn't need to reflect all the problems of the risk group and this risk group can be addressed by more than one program. At the same time, depending on the complexity of the selected problem, a given program can cover more than one risk group in interventions to overcome a specific risk/problem.

It is planned to periodically update the content of the individual programs depending on changes in the environment and feedback from users - families, individuals and groups.

While designing the package of priority programs, special attention is paid again to the **key principles and approaches in the work**:

- **Integrated approach in supporting target groups**: Programs are not independent, isolated initiatives that exist/are implemented separately and independently of each other. Therefore, the programs are considered as a comprehensive package that covers the priority areas of intervention - they are interconnected in the spectrum of the overall picture of services and at the same time are



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distinguished due to the focus on the specific needs of individual target groups. Here it is necessary to think about both the general framework of the package of programs and the content of each program.

- **Considering the specific ethnocultural characteristics of the respective vulnerable community,** which to a large extent are determining both the approaches and methods for reaching communities and gaining the trust of risk groups, as well as the preferred strategies for change in the individual family/person or the community.
- **Flexibility:** Programs are developed following the identified problems and needs of the community, children and families at risk, assessed as a result of mobile work and mapping. Despite the extensive information gathered in advance, when adopting the package of programs, some elements of the activities may remain, which will be further specified during the preparation or implementation of the programs. In such a case, the program shall note which these elements are, when and how – with what instruments it is planned to specify them.
- **Comprehensiveness, completeness and adequacy of the package of priority programs for the given period:** Which risk groups are covered in interventions – are there any important risk groups that must be covered? From the point of view of efficiency in investing resources (such as people, time, etc.), it is important to monitor the balance of interventions in terms of diversity and planned volume; is there an “oversaturation” of activities in support of some target groups at the expense of “schematics, scarcity” in the planned intervention for other groups that are also assessed as priorities for work during the same period.

Feasibility is also an important principle in the development of the package of programs. Pragmatism predetermines also the reasonable degree of complexity of the scheduled program documents without complicated developments, but with clear goals and activities, logically interconnected, which will lead to the desired specific result.

5.3 Prevention programs for changing attitudes to pre-modern family models

Child marriage prevention programs and casework should consider **the pre-modern social norms as a key barrier and understand the mechanisms of reproduction of traditional norms in the isolated ethnic community** – with Roma, Millet, or other preferred self-identification. Child marriage is a problem in segregated neighbourhoods and usually does not affect integrated families from these communities, who have chosen to live among the majority outside the segregated environment.

The tradition of virginity and the protection of the girl’s honour is an extremely persistent pre-modern social norm for family models in closed communities. It remains the main community-accepted reason for child marriage, although its number and share are decreasing. Field studies in segregated communities confirm that child marriage is unanimously disapproved of by parents and is defined as a risk, especially for girls. At the same time, however, educated parents admit that in the name of the tradition of virginity, they are ready to put up with early marriage and neglect the education, professional fulfilment and happiness of their children.

Such a change requires long-term and targeted community work to overcome pre-modern social norms and attitudes to family models, change behavioural practices in life planning, and slowly and gradually



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incorporate development elements into family survival strategies. A package of large-scale prevention and family planning programs should be implemented within the framework of community work to change the attitudes, social norms and behavioural practices of isolated Roma communities, to promote the emancipation of Roma girls to dream and set higher personal goals for a violence-free, independent life.

The analysis of attitudes in isolated communities shows that programs for the broad prevention of child marriage need to be aimed at:

- Changing attitudes in Roma communities towards pre-modern family models and social norms, which would form a favourable community environment for interrupting the repetition of the child marriage model by new generations, through:
 - Group work with the opinion-makers and local community leadership, who influence the formation of attitudes and public opinion in the Roma neighbourhood;
 - Systematic individual work with children and families - in support of a new mindset about life planning through the rational understanding of the concept of future realization and motivation for higher education and professional qualification.
- Promoting alternatives for personal realization that would displace child marriage in the priorities of adolescents and young people from isolated ethnic communities.
- Building attitudes and skills for a meaningful and rational choice of priorities and assessing how and to what extent it is possible to simultaneously complete education and start a family.
- Support for developing the motivation and practical skills of adolescents for personal fulfilment - how to turn their dreams into action.
- Support for achieving the desired education and professional fulfilment through prevention of dropout and targeted efforts to improve the educational outcomes of students in separate and mixed schools with a high percentage of students from ethnic minorities - their presence in school alone is not enough, knowledge, skills and self-confidence are needed.

The target groups of preventive community work include not only girls at risk of early marriage, the boys and young men and their families but also the entire community, regardless of the degree of risk in individual families. Interventions should reach all generations and all segments in the specific ethnic community. Even when young people think differently, their behaviour and choice of a model for personal realization depend directly on changes in the attitudes of parents, the family community and the social norms in the community environment.

The younger generation – Roma girls and boys who have not yet entered into early marriage/cohabitation, by developing targeted programs for different age groups, as well as depending on their school coverage:

- Young Roma girls of school age who attend school;
- Girls who, for various reasons, have dropped out of education or irregularly attend school - the most at-risk group for child marriage and early pregnancy remains girls who are already out of school;
- Boys and adolescent young men – attending or having dropped out of school.

Age characteristics: The prevailing opinion of the respondents of the field survey was that support for developing the interests of young people and stimulating their desire for self-realization should begin from an earlier age, before puberty – from 11-12 years. The critical age for intensive prevention of child marriage



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

The older generations in the community, among whom work should be done to change attitudes towards pre-modern family models. In particular:

- Parents of adolescent girls and boys with a special focus on mothers – future mothers-in-law;
- Grandparents, who in many cases “*by right*” make decisions in the household about the future of children and youth;
- Authorities in the community/neighbourhood, who (a) can be won over as “agents of change” in support of interventions to prevent child marriage or (b) can become open or hidden opponents and even “enemies” of changing attitudes and behavioural patterns in the closed Roma community:
 - The tacitly recognized leadership of authoritative clans/families and individuals, who significantly influence attitudes and public opinion in the neighbourhood about acceptable social norms and behavioural patterns;
 - Formal and informal leadership in the community: local civil NGOs, religious and other structures, activists, municipal councillors, mediators (health, education, labour), professionals and other influential individuals in the community, who to one degree or another claim to represent the interests of the Roma community before the macro-society in the settlement.
- The widest possible circle of people in the Roma neighbourhood, to be reached directly through programs for broad prevention and/or indirectly through the secondary impact of the “agents of change” within the community.

The program approach requires a combination of group work and individual support for individual users – children and families. Along with group work, the teams continue to provide individual support for individual users – children and families, youth, pregnant women, etc., adapted to their specific problems/needs. (This clarification is important in order not to break the connection with people; and to maintain the necessary flexibility and individual nature of the support). In response to identified needs, they will follow the principle of including individual users in programs as quickly and fully as possible.

Methods and tools for in-depth community work

Innovative methods of in-depth community work **aim to provoke community groups to rethink their perceptions of traditional social norms and family models, to try to reassess their views on the “benefits” and “losses” of maintaining the tradition of child marriage through the prism of the interests and future of the younger generation.** In this way, community work facilitators can guide people from different generations to change attitudes and thinking in the community to:

- support prevention in vulnerable groups, where the risk of early child marriage has been identified;
- provoke a change in perceptions and attitudes towards parental care for children and the risk of child development in high-risk vulnerable communities;
- help limit the repetition of risks for children by mobilising community potential and stimulating community development of high-risk vulnerable ethnic minorities and groups.



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Optional activities are the facilitation of thematic discussion groups, self-help groups and mutual support groups that bring together people from at-risk communities with a common problem and common or similar interests, who know each other and feel comfortable sharing opinions and ideas.

Interactive methods are suitable for participatory reflection on the risks and harms of child marriage and early birth. Such a technique is the life calendar, which links risks to key stages and events in the child's development, through group discussion and visualisation from the opinions of participants, who take turns sharing their personal experiences and views as 'experts' for their community. During the discussion, the facilitator can also note the differences between Roma and the majority in terms of key stages – the age for completing education, professional qualification, and starting work, career, marriage and having children. Illustrating the lifeline stimulates participants to think about how child marriage deprives Roma girls and boys of childhood, of time for learning, dooming Roma girls to enter the labour market without education and without a profession at the age of 29-30, when their children are already in kindergarten and school, to look for low-paid work, without opportunities for personal fulfillment and economic independence in the future. The technique is suitable for working with different age groups, both adolescents and young people, parents, and grandparents.

The promotion of role models is influential for youngsters. Meetings with young successful Roma can serve as an example of personal realisation: young, educated and coping with the challenges of life Roma who have left a certain community and grown up in front of others and managed to achieve more than others, without forgetting their Roma origin and without neglecting their personal life and family.

Enhancing the community development process is another important principle that should be applied in efforts to prevent early marriages. The community and its various mechanisms of influence are very important for the lives of individual Roma families. Therefore, it is necessary to implement preventive programs and approaches that have proven their effectiveness, such as community discussions; group discussions; information and education on reproductive health and family planning; the method of family group conferences, etc. Individual conversations or family discussions within the framework of such campaigns are an effective measure to raise awareness of the issue of early marriages, which is a necessary step towards its solution.

The spectrum of optional programs that can support social inclusion and the prevention of early marriages and early births is very wide, including:

- **Programs for developing skills and attitudes for professional qualification and career** – aimed at adolescents and young people, which can be implemented together with schools.
- **Training activities to prepare adolescents and young people for family life** – aimed at broad prevention of unplanned pregnancy, the risks of abandonment and neglect of babies and young children. The services aim to ensure adequate readiness (attitudes, knowledge, skills) of adolescents and young women to understand and fulfil the roles of husband and wife and the role of parent.
- **Programs for family planning** – aimed at reducing child abandonment by limiting unwanted and risky pregnancies. These services include two main components: (1) prevention in school, health education for adolescents and young people - future parents; (2) prevention of unwanted pregnancy, family planning and AG services – for families and young people at risk, mothers of many children, families with cases of child abandonment.



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- **Awareness of steps in raising a newborn and a child.** Counseling and support for the young mother – aimed not only at young mothers but also at mothers-in-law in the Roma community, to change attitudes and end unhealthy traditional practices in raising children (for example, salting babies).

The necessary changes must affect all generations and spheres of life in isolated Roma neighbourhoods.

Roma girls and young women must be encouraged to dream of their future beyond the life model of their mothers – married young and giving birth to 2-3 children before the age of 18, without education, profession, means and a chance for an independent life for their young family and children, dependent on older generations, deprived of independent decision-making for their lives, family and children. They must know better their rights to say “no” to the violent and coercive decisions of their parents and to be informed about how and where they can get support and protection. They must understand their rights to be able to make decisions about their own lives – the right to choose education and profession.

Despite the low number of boys who become child husbands (they usually marry over the age of 18), **Roma boys** also fall victim to forced marriages for various reasons/arguments of their parents: to “respect the honour” of the girl, to be controlled in the family instead of “doing bad things and going down the wrong path with bad company”, to secure a “good bride from a good family”, etc., etc. Furthermore, all Roma youth – girls and boys – need awareness of children’s rights. This work should be specifically targeted at girls to build their confidence in asserting the right to choose their future. Youth need support mechanisms to achieve better education and professional qualifications, to increase their self-esteem and capacity to counteract the discrimination and prejudice of the majority, which can easily discourage them and block their efforts to achieve higher goals.

Roma parents and older generations in isolated communities need to better understand and feel what their daughters are missing out on due to early marriages and early pregnancies, which forcibly interrupt their childhood and affect emotional and intellectual development and healthy growth. They need to be re-informed about the legal provisions and restrictions on child marriage to ensure that the law is in place and enforced – in particular for criminal cases of cohabitation with girls under 16. Parents need to be informed about the health risks to girl brides and their babies. Intensive work and support from community change agents should be provided in communities to make parents and grandparents reflect and reconsider their views on the losses and gains for girls, including social norms about virginity.

The progress in achieving these strategic goals depends on the necessary profound changes towards social inclusion of isolated Roma communities, in the social assistance system and other sectors – education, healthcare, employment, security, human rights and non-discrimination attitudes of institutions and macro-society.

6 Provision of Intensive Family Support in Cases of Child Marriages

In parallel with the preventive programs, the centers for community work are supporting young girls, who have already entered child marriage. Per every standard of social work, they are classified as children at high risk; Child Protection Departments are opening cases for underaged mothers and newborn babies, and are delivering referrals to specialised social service centers. Of course, the priority focus is the child at risk. The professionals are experienced in providing services for the prevention of child neglect or abandonment



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and supporting childcare in the best interest of the child, by building parental skills of the child-mother, providing consultations and mediation for access to healthcare, social benefits, etc. and other services, according to the detailed assessment of parental capacity and needs, addressed in the adopted plan for support.

Along with the diverse important child-focused interventions, the Toolkit recommends expanding the support for the young family towards overcoming the most negative aftereffects of child marriage on their personal development through encouraging child-parents' self-esteem, education, access to professional, basic social skills. In the long term, this approach is intended to reduce the risks for the next generation to repeat the model of child marriage.

Therefore, intensive family support in cases of child marriages provides all needed services to address the risks for children born in a young family, to develop the parenting skills of the child-parents, and to prevent the risks of violence. In addition, it should address the pre-modern behavioural practices and attitudes to pre-modern family models, aimed in particular at:

(1) Minimize the negative consequences of child marriage for the personal development of the young child-parents with a special focus on Roma girls, through:

- Involvement in flexible programs for returning to the educational system, mediation with the school and other educational institutions;
- Individual support for motivation and self-esteem;
- Courses and group work for developing personal skills and increase self-confidence;
- Social-health services for increasing the health literacy of the young family and the household;
- Family planning services aimed at preventing early births and at least delaying the second birth of the child-mothers;
- Mediation for ensuring access to professional qualification and employment;
- Group work on specific topics.

(2) Support the emancipation of the young family from the power of the mother-in-law, by gradually getting out of dependence on the older generation, through:

- Social work and consultations with a psychologist of the young mother and father for developing the responsibility of the young people for the care and future of the family, asserting independence and making responsible decisions about their lives;
- Social work and consultations with psychologist of the mother-in-law, father-in-law and grand parents in large households;
- Involving in group work together with other mothers-in-law to exchange experience and opinions on family relations, harmful practices in childcare (like tight swaddling, 'salting' the small baby), education of daughters-in-law and children, etc. With the support of a social worker, the discussion can be moderated by mothers-in-law with modern mindset from 'notable' families, which are playing the role of opinion-makers in the community;
- Health literacy sessions to inform the older generation about the health risks from early births for the young mother and the baby.

The target groups for intensive family support in cases of child marriage include:



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- 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 the risk of child marriage below;
- Minor and underage girls who have entered into early cohabitation on family grounds, who live in the families of their husbands;
- Minor and underage pregnant women and mothers, as well as their children;
- Minor and underage pregnant women and mothers, as well as their children, who have been abandoned by their birth families and are not accepted into the father's family;
- The young husbands and their fathers;
- Parents of those who have entered into early marriage and extended families, with special attention to the mothers-in-law and mothers of the girls.

The girl's specific risks and needs, as well as the available social resources within the household and extended family, are identified through an in-depth individual needs assessment. Following good practices in social services, intensive social work to overcome the consequences and risks of child marriage and to prevent early births needs to be planned individually according to the specific risks and social resources of the girl who has become a child bride/child mother, and her families – the husband's new family/household and the birth family of her parents.

The integrated approach is applied in combining different types of services and intersectoral support for users. Of particular importance for understanding the specifics is the understanding of the intersectoral nature of integrated services. Unlike some observed practices of mixed services, which rather mechanically combine different components (social, health, educational) in one organizational structure, the emphasis is on the integrated approach. Intersectoral services imply close operational interaction between institutions in different sectors - employment, social assistance, education, healthcare, etc. to solve the problems of families and children at risk, which is initiated and coordinated by the team working on the case.

Specific services and mechanisms are foreseen to ensure access to justice and protection from violence for (potential) victims.

According to Bulgarian law, early marriage is considered child abuse. It can be sexual and/or psychological and/or physical abuse with lasting consequences on the child's development. Anyone who becomes aware or suspects that a child needs protection (according to Art. 7, para. 1 and para. 2 of the Child Protection Act) is obliged to immediately inform the Child Protection Department, the State Agency for Child Protection or the police.

The interaction of the institutions and their obligations in this regard are regulated in a Coordination Mechanism, structured to function at a local level. This coordination mechanism for reporting a child victim of violence or at risk of violence should also be activated in the case of child marriage, but this could only happen if a report has been filed, and if the institutions register a case of violence. In the absence of a report of violence, the coordination mechanism is usually not activated.



6.1 Case management for a child at risk and a family/household at risk

According to the methodology of intensive family support within the social service community work, the 'case' is the family at risk, instead of the 'case' of the child at risk, which is typical for specialised social services and for the Child Protection Departments.

Working on cases of families at risk, the teams provide complex services to the entire family and all children in the family/in the household, supported in the context of the family environment. The approach to working with the entire family and the household is applied, i.e. the user of the activity is the family. When formulating the risk, the various risk areas for the family are determined and support is planned for them. If necessary, additional information is collected from that included in the mapping and reflected in the relevant area of the mapping documentation. Support can include all activities; a plan is developed containing all actions needed, deadlines and participants.

The Toolkit presents the methods, principles and procedures for the management of a case of a family at risk, as well as the profile and content of the services provided. The main steps for managing a family at risk case are described, i.e. risk assessment/formulation, planning – setting a plan for support, implementation and periodic review of the plan, specifying the roles and responsibilities of all team members and institutions involved.

7 Networking and Creating Partnerships in Support To the Community Work – Methods and Steps

Partnership, broad collaboration, and complementarity of the mobile team's efforts with all stakeholders are guiding principles in the development and providing of these innovative services.

The Toolkit outlines practical advice to social service centers for how to establish **inter-sectoral partnerships and interaction with institutions**, in particular with:

- The social system – the territorial departments of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the National Agency for Social Assistance (child protection departments, directorates for social assistance at municipal and regional levels), other providers and centers for social services;
- Municipal administration, including the neighbouring municipalities;
- National and local institutions, which are responsible for sectoral policies, related to social inclusion such as education, healthcare, employment, social infrastructure and housing;
- Schools and kindergartens, educational institutions, youth centers, etc.
- Health institutions, hospitals, family doctors;
- NGOs, and community initiative groups.

The creation of a **network of volunteers in the community** to support the mobile teams is crucial for the broad coverage of excluded vulnerable communities and isolated groups in innovative services. The volunteer network is developed on a territorial basis to gradually cover all target communities in the area.



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This volunteer network plays an important role - on the one hand, it facilitates the opening of the entrance of mobile teams inside the communities to cover at-risk families in the services, at the same time, through the volunteers, the collection of information on problems cases in the places is optimised. On the other hand, the volunteer network can become an effective lever for community development - volunteers have the potential to become "agents of change", capable and motivated to convey messages aimed at a gradual change of attitudes in vulnerable ethnic communities.



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