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## ROMA GIRLS AND WOMEN - ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT OF THEIR EDUCATION

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***Abstract:** The paper reviews existing issues of modern Romani family and attitude toward Romani girls and women in Romani society in Europe and Bulgaria. There are review of the aspects of education of this segregated group and the main factors of early drop-out of Romani girls from school that leads to social exclusion. The paper gives briefly a description of the good practices for inclusive education too.*

***Keywords:** Romani girls and women, social exclusion*

### INTRODUCTION

The problems of one of the most vulnerable ethnic groups in Europe –Roma women and girls, became a focus of attention in 1995 when the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men conducted a workshop on the topic “The Issues of Roma Women” in Strasbourg. As a result, some European countries (Sweden, Norway, Spain, etc.) have started national policies for enhancement of literacy and insurance of equal admittance for women and men to social positions and education. The Bulgarian Strategy for Support of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020) points out as main recommendationsthe intercultural education and the implication of various policies for reduction of Romani girls’ early dropout of schools.

### EXPOSITION

#### **Recent tendencies in education of Roma girls and women in Bulgaria and Europe Union**

In all European societies, including Bulgarian one, there are significant difficulties in education of Romani girls. They arise from not only segregation and discrimination from majority but also from social attitudes inside the Romani ethnic group (Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020)). In most cases the Roma girls drop out of schools earlier than Romani boys because they start to work or get married (Research of Social Norms That Cease the Admittance of Romani Girls to Education, 2016; Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020)). Low educational level, frequent absences and early dropouts of schools may lead to unemployment, difficulties with the settlement of documents and health insurances, marital problems, human trafficking and prostitution later in the lifespan (Ilieva, 2016; Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020)). There is a growth in cases when Roma women and girls are living and working illegally abroad (they usually work as house cleaners, agricultural workers, prostitutes or thieves ). This leads to higher risk for social exclusion, exploitation, trafficking and violence. More closed position of Romani societies to their women wages the fact that they rarely attend to consultations or meetings that discuss their rights and support them to get out from the current situation of social exclusion.

According to Research of Social Norms That Cease the Admittance of Romani Girls to Education, conducted from Sofia Zahova in February 2016, there is an increase of educational level of Romani girls including these ones, which are already married. In 2001 6181 girls under the age of 18 were in cohabitation or got married as 2883 from them is under the age of 16. In ten years, the number of 18-years-old girls in cohabitation has been decreased about 30 % and in 2011 they were 2334. The decrease in 16-years-olds in cohabitation was over 33 % - they were 1505 in

2011. The number of mothers under the age of 16 and 18 who gave birth to their first child have is also declining in recent years. In 2013 2 705 girls under the age of 18 gave birth to their first child, 790 of whom were under of age of 16. Although decreasing, the number of juveniles who gave birth to a second and third child remains high (p.1). This research indicates the main reasons for this positive tendency in social norms: first, the increased number of girls and women who graduate higher schools and universities and who marry and give birth later, and second, the support by different programs supporting the education of Romani people (not only women and girls) on national and regional level.

Most of Roma girls drop out in secondary level. According to a study conducted in 2014 among four Roma ethnic groups in Municipality of Haskovo, South Bulgaria, there are different attitudes toward education in different clans and social classes in Romani society. Many Romani clans in Bulgaria have different educational attitudes. Their attitudes depend from the way of life and culture, adopted in the concrete clan (Amalipe Center, 1999). There is a tendency the children (not only girls) from families with higher socio-economic status, when parents are with higher education, they are working and living in the cities among Bulgarian population, to continue their education after 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Among the modern families there are girls who want university education to find prestigious work. Their parents support them in this choice. On the other hand, traditional families especially those ones who are Muslims and have difficulties with Bulgarian language and literacy have negative attitudes toward higher education of their women. The parents from traditional communities do not accept girls to continue their education because they think that this will jeopardize their future as wives and mothers. The second reason these families to deny the education of girls is that they have lower socio-economic status that leads to financial difficulties. The girls usually drop out from school to work or to help their mothers with household and upbringing of younger siblings (Gender Equality and Roma Exclusion – The Perspective of Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria, 2014).

The main factor for early dropout of school system of Roma girls are the early marriages arranged by their families. At the same time, some girls stop to go to school in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but they marry and give birth later. This shows that there are also other reasons for the early dropout of Roma girls. The problems with attending of Roma adolescents in the school arise from various factors: socio-economic factors (poverty, unemployment or low employment of the parents); internal and external migration, lack of necessary documents; cultural and psychological factors as mutual mistrust and prejudgments between Roma families and teachers, lack of attractive role models that will enhance the willing and motivation to go to school (Alipieva, 2006); low or poor preparedness of school system for multicultural education and support of students with Roma origin.

In many European countries, there are similar problems regardless of the social and educational policies undertaken from the governments (Thematic Report of School Attendance of Roma Children, In Particular Roma Girls, 2013). These similarities show stable socio-cultural model in attitudes toward education and school attendance among Roma communities in different countries.

### **Socio-cultural attitudes toward women in Roma communities**

A common European problem is establishment of gender equality in the Roma society. Many surveys from different countries report that Roma women and girls suffer from highest forms of discrimination within their community (Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020). It is accepted in their culture women to marry early and to not occupy high levels of social hierarchy. In Europe Union Roma women and girls are among the most vulnerable groups in societies and they are often objects of violence, trafficking, begging, prostitution, etc. Therefore, the key task of the Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020) is to organize national campaigns promoting the awareness of issues of Roma women and girls and their educational status – a guarantee for better life and career.

In Bulgarian society there are three models of family attitudes toward marital age and level of education of the girls:

1. Traditional model, which is observed in more rigid communities in villages and segregated areas of towns. In this communities girls get marry between age of 12 to 15 and interrupt their education because they give birth to their first and sometimes second and third child;
2. Mixed model, where the graduating of secondary school is accepted and girls get marry after the age of 16;
3. Modern model – the graduating of higher and university degree is accepted and girls are following the norms of Bulgarian society.

It was mentioned that families from traditional model usually live in villages, small towns or ghettos in the cities. Their characteristics are closeness, rigidity and adherence to traditional patriarchal family rules. The early marriages and dropouts from the schools are accepted because parents are afraid of keeping their virginity. The going out alone is shameful and neighbors may espouse the girl as failed. The issues of virginity are nominal sign in Roma culture. In most traditional families grooms pay a ransom – so-called “babahaka” as guarantee of the honesty of the bride. As a result of the socio-economic crisis in Bulgaria not all families manage to pay this ransom. Thus many young couples live in cohabitation before marriage. Unfortunately, this unregulated cohabitation and the financial insecurity lead to marital problems and separations. Separation is a stigma in Roma community and the girl or woman, who is separated or divorced, is perceived as depraved and unsuccessful. The most common cases of human trafficking and prostitution are from the “returned brides”. Therefore, the main value for adolescent girls is desire to be a good wife and mother. The education is not valued enough. The main agents of marital relations are the older women in the family. They train the girls in household duties and patriarchal model of demeanor to the husband. After the marriage, the girl must join the household spending at least 7-8 hours a day doing housework.

Another reason girls from traditional and mixed families to drop out of schools is the necessity to support their nuclear family financially (Gender Equality and Roma Inclusion – The Perspective of Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria, 2014). They usually deal with begging or delivery of irons. Some of them leave Bulgaria with their mothers to work abroad. During Bulgarian political crisis due to the mass employment and financial insecurity the tradition patriarchal model started to crumble. It is not uncommon now married women to help family budget. In traditional families the woman need to ask permission from her husband or father to go to work. Most women in these families work in the neighborhood in daylight hours due to the fear of infidelity or dishonor. Most cases of long-term emigrants in European countries are women because men usually are working seasonal or agrarian work. This leads to separation of these families. Problems with unemployment, insecurity and stress lead to aggression and domestic violence. Thus, the better financial status of the parents, near location of the school to the home, more modern attitude toward household duties are factors for education of the daughters after 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

The research among the four Roma communities in South Bulgaria highlights some important characteristics of girls from modern families: 1) they have parents who support their education; 2) they are studying in integrated (ethnically mixed) schools; 3) they speak Bulgarian fluently (Gender Equality and Roma Inclusion – The Perspective of Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria, 2014, p. 57). The academic failures of the Roma students usually come from language difficulties and negative expectations and prejudgments of Bulgarian teachers. This tendency is stable in so-called segregated schools in villages or Roma ghettos in cities. There are frequent cases of remission of absences from classes or reduced strictness to academic achievements of Roma students. This may be detrimental to achievement of higher education. On the contrary, parents from modern families have high level of education or they want their children to achieve higher social status. These families usually are living in the cities, scattered among the rest of the population taking models of identification from majority in Bulgarian society (Alipieva, 2006). Parents provide not only financial support but also free time for girls to study. The marriage after age of 18 is normal event in this group. However, there is a negative tendency especially among

Kaldarashi Roma girls with higher education not to be preferred as wives by male peers in their clan.

Thus, socio-cultural norms within Roma community have a negative impact on education of girls and women that leads to social exclusion and marginalization.

### **Policies for educational support of Roma girls and women**

Various reports from different countries (Bulgaria, Sweden, Latvia, Norway, etc.) have indicated small but unstable progress in educational level of Roma girls and women. There is a trend more girls to achieve higher academic qualification. They become role models for other girls in the community. The reports have showed that despite restrictive measures and bans against the parents that neglect education of their daughters there is a tendency these intervention to be temporary and ineffective (Research of Social Norms That Cease the Admittance of Romani Girls to Education, 2016). The Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls (2014-2020) upholdsthe establishment of national policies for reduction of early marriages, obligatory education for all groups in the society, classes in mother language, media campaigns promoting awareness of risk from early pregnancy, etc. NGO's also have positive impact on better education working with members from Roma community. They have led to reduction of early marriages by different programs – health and sexual education, classes for Roma folklore at schools, etc.

The educational institutions in all levels of education need to make the following policies:

- Emergence of the role models of Roma girls which perform well in academic settings and achieve high levels of education;
- Availability of health and educational mediators in the community;
- Desegregation of the schools and increasing the requirements to academic obligations and achievements of Roma students;
- Intensive classes in Bulgarian language and literacy for students from Muslim clans;
- Support from specialists who may deal with family planning and family consultations especially in cases of dropouts of school and/or early marriage and pregnancy;
- Financial support to Roma students at universities in the specialties of Pedagogy, Social Pedagogy, Psychology and Medicine, because they will provide educational and health politics in their community in the future;
- Reintegration of girls who are married or have children in the school system;
- Extracurricular programs in junior high school as clubs, classes of Roma folklore and traditions, sports, etc.;
- Group activities for children, parents and teachers stimulating better connection between the school and community, etc.

### **CONCLUSION**

One of the main problems of the society is the gender inequality in the Roma ethnic group. This leads to risk for social exclusion and marginalization of Roma girls and women. Although the gradual progress in their educational level and provided training programs for Roma families, the socio-cultural model of Roma community has a negative impact on the social inclusion of Roma women and girls. Therefore, the national and regional educational policies need to focus on conducting and improving of sustainable models not only for students but also for their families.

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