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ROMA INFLUENCERS NETWORK/2024-1-EL01-KA220-ADU-000247507



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National Report on Early Marriages and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities

Portugal Report

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I. Introduction

I.1. The Roma Influencers Network Project

The present report is integrated in the European Project Roma Influencers Network - breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in Roma communities (Grant Agreement n. 2024-1-EL01-KA220-ADU-000247507) in the framework of the Programme ERASMUS+.

Roma Influencers Network project centres on early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities and is focused on empowering and awareness raising of the Roma community, especially women and girls. The main purpose is to suggest ways to change behaviours and attitudes in order to overcome, reduce or eliminate the practice and its harmful impacts.

The Consortium of the project consists by 4 countries: Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania.

This national report is part of the WP2 – *Breaking the circle of early marriages and early motherhood in Roma Communities*, and in particular of the Activity 2.2. *National research, on early marriages and early motherhood among Roma community*, was carried out in the four different countries with CESIS, in Portugal, as team leader.

The aim of this report is to contribute to a better understanding of early marriage and early motherhood, particularly among Roma women and girls in each partner country, and in this case in Portugal. After a brief introduction to the subject, it describes the legal framework, and the policies implemented to prevent the problem in a more or less direct way. Bearing in mind that this is a project that considers the specificities of Roma communities, this report also briefly characterises the situation of these communities in

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Portugal, using published bibliography. On the other hand, it analyses information gathered by the project team, as part of its development, from fifty Portuguese Roma women.

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I.2. Early marriage and early motherhood: Global concerns

Early marriage and early motherhood remain urgent global challenges. Both the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), along with other key research organizations such as the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Girls Not Brides, have extensively documented the causes and consequences related to these practices.

UNICEF (2023) defines child marriage as any formal marriage or informal union involving a child under the age of 18 and it estimates that approximately 12 million girls are married before reaching that age limit each year, many of whom become mothers shortly thereafter.

Early marriage and early motherhood are particularly prevalent in low- and middle-income countries, where gender inequality, poverty and lack of education combine to undermine the rights and futures of millions of girls. However, it also remains a problem in Europe, where it varies considerably between regions. Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania report higher rates of teenage births. For example, in 2021 Bulgaria had the highest teenage birth rate in Europe.¹ If we consider the age between 10 and 14 years, the rate is 1.6‰ in Bulgaria and 1.45‰ in Romania. The rates increase when the age group 15-19 is considered: 38.7‰ and 33.89‰ respectively. In 2015, 11.9% of first births in Bulgaria and 12.3% in Romania were from teenage mothers.²

The same source indicates the following rates in Portugal: 5.75‰ for the 15-19 age group; 0.07‰ for the 10-14 age group.

¹Adolescent birth rate, 10-14 year olds:

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/adolescent-fertility?tab=chart&country=PRT~GRC~IRL~ROU>;

Adolescent birth rate, 15-19 year olds:

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/adolescent-fertility-15-19?tab=chart&country=ROU~BGR>

² Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20170808-1>

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 years worldwide. Due to their physical immaturity, adolescent mothers are at greater risk of life-threatening complications such as obstructed labour and obstetric fistula. Their children are also more likely to be born prematurely, with low birth weight or with neonatal health problems.

The consequences of early motherhood are not limited to health. UNICEF (2023) emphasises that early marriage often leads to the termination of a girl's education and the loss of her autonomy and economic opportunities. Girls are also often isolated from their peers, subjected to domestic violence and forced into lifelong dependency.

These observations are supported by evidence from the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). Jain and Kurz (2007) argue that early marriage is deeply embedded in social norms and economic insecurity, and stress the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches that include education, community mobilisation and economic incentives for families. More recently, organizations such as Girls Not Brides (2020) further highlight the social and cultural drivers of child marriage. This organization identifies poverty, insecurity, and lack of educational access as major risk factors and calls for localized, culturally sensitive solutions.

In its State of World Population 2013 report, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) explores how adolescent pregnancy often reflects deep-seated gender inequalities (UNFPA, 2013). This in turn points to the need for structural change - changing the environment in which girls live, and the expectations placed on them - and the promotion of human and women's rights.

Collectively, these institutions and researchers converge on key conclusions: early marriage and early motherhood are driven by intersecting factors, including gender



discrimination, poverty and social norms. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting girls' health, education, autonomy and future prospects. Effective solutions must therefore be equally comprehensive - combining legal reform, education, access to health care, community engagement, and economic support.

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II. Framework on early marriage and early motherhood at a national level

II.1. Portuguese National Legal Framework

II. 1.1. About the concepts

Until April 2025, the Portuguese Civil Code establishes that marriage may only take place between people aged 18 or over, or 16 years of age with the consent of their parents. Law No. 39/2025 amends the conditions by removing the exception for marriage between the ages of 16 and 18 with parental consent. Marriage of minors is now forbidden under any circumstances. The Portuguese legal system no longer recognises the possibility of children becoming emancipated through marriage, i.e. enjoying rights equivalent to those of an adult.

Recent work by the Working Group to Prevent and Combat Child, Early and Forced Marriages (Grupo de Trabalho para a Prevenção e Combate dos Casamentos Infantis, Precoces e Forçados – GTCIPF), which was established by Government Order No. 1498-A/2021 on 5 February, expands the definition of child marriage beyond legal provisions. The GTCIPF defines child marriage as *'a formal or informal union between two individuals where at least one party is under 18 and therefore lacks the physical and psychological capacity to provide fully informed and free consent'*. This also includes actions intended to establish such a union, even if it does not ultimately take place. (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 14)

The same document defines early marriage as a distinct concept, separating it from specific age limits and focusing instead on the overall development of those involved. It is described as *'a formal or informal union between two people, in which at least one*

party, due to their emotional, sexual, or psychosocial development, is unable to provide free, informed, and full consent.' (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 15)

Finally, forced marriage is defined as '*a union, whether formal or informal, between two people resulting from constraints placed on either or both of them, whether they are adults or children*'. This also includes acts intended to result in such a union, even if the union does not materialise. '*The constraint can be physical, psychological, social, economic or other.*' (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 15)

Following the publication of Law 39/2025 on 1 April, these concepts are now enshrined in law. The revised 2025 Protection of Children and Young People in Danger Act states that '*child, early or forced marriage or similar union*' refers to '*any situation in which someone under the age of 18 lives with another person in circumstances similar to those of spouses, regardless of whether they have been forced into such a union and regardless of their cultural, ethnic or national origin.*'

As for early pregnancy, the research carried out in this area in Portugal uses the WHO definition according to which early pregnancy corresponds to pregnancy during adolescence, i.e. between the ages of 10 and 19.

II.1.2. Law and policy in Portugal

II.1.2.1. International Conventions and orientations

Portugal is a State Party to the key international instruments that bind it to protect children and young people, eliminate discrimination against women, and defend and promote their rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was ratified on 12 September 1990 by Presidential Decree 49/90. This paved the way for comprehensive reforms to legislation concerning children and their rights.

Portugal has also ratified the three Optional Protocols to the Convention:

- Portugal signed the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict on 6 September 2000 and ratified it on 19 August 2003. It entered into force on 19 September 2003. The protocol establishes a minimum age of 18 for voluntary recruitment into the Armed Forces.
- Portugal signed the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography on 6 September 2000. It was ratified on 16 May 2003 and entered into force the following month.
- The Optional Protocol on the Establishment of a Communications Procedure was signed on 28 February 2012, ratified on 24 September 2013 and came into effect on 14 April 2014. It allows children or their representatives to submit complaints about violations of their rights directly to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Portugal undergoes regular review by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee's most recent report on Portugal, which draws on the country's fifth and sixth national periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention, highlights several key recommendations. Published on 27 September 2019, the report notably calls for a legal prohibition on the marriage of individuals under 18 with no exceptions and urges the eradication of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM).

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The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, adopted in Istanbul on 11 May 2011, was approved by the Portuguese government in 2012. It was then ratified by the Portuguese Parliament on 21 January 2013 (Parliamentary Resolution No. 4/2013) and came into force in 2014. Portugal's ratification of the convention led to legislative changes, particularly the criminalisation of forced marriage. Additionally, the scope of the 5th National Plan to Prevent and Combat Domestic and Gender Violence (2014–2017) was expanded to include other types of gender-based violence, not just domestic violence.

In December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/69/156 on child, early and forced marriage, considering the 2013 Human Rights Council resolution on child marriage. Two years later, Resolution A/RES/71/175 was adopted, reaffirming and strengthening previous commitments and emphasising the responsibility of Member States to end these practices. The latest resolution, A/RES/77/2022, adopted in December 2022, calls on states to develop and implement comprehensive, coordinated strategies to eliminate child, early and forced marriage and to support girls, adolescents and women who are already married. This support includes

strengthening child protection systems, providing safe shelters, ensuring access to justice, and sharing best practices across borders (p.3).³

In response to these concerns, the Portuguese government set up its first Working Group for the Prevention and Combating of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (GTCIPF). The group was tasked with drafting the White Paper on Preventing and Combating Early and Forced Child Marriage, as mandated by Order No. 1498-A/2021 of 5 February.⁴

As a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals, Portugal is committed to ending child, early and forced marriage by 2030, in line with Target 5.3, which *aims to eliminate harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation*.

Following Recommendation 378/1 (2013) of the Council of the European Union, which advises countries to implement effective measures for the integration of Roma communities and encourages their active citizenship through social, economic, political and cultural participation, particularly at the local level, Portugal developed its first strategy to achieve this goal.

II. 1.2.2. Portuguese National legislative framework

Law No. 39/2025 prohibits the marriage of minors in Portugal, regardless of parental consent or a court decision. The law amends Article 1601 of the Civil Code, which now expressly states that being under the age of 18 is an impediment to marriage. Conversely, Law 7/2001 establishes that individuals under the age of 18 when

³ Available at: [Microsoft Word - N1470586](#).

⁴ GTCIPF (2024). Livro Branco sobre Prevenção e Combate aos Casamentos Infantis Precoces e Forçados. Ministério da Justiça e da Modernização e Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género. Lisboa. Available at: https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/LivroBranco_V3.pdf



registering a de facto union forfeit all rights and benefits granted during their lifetime or upon their death (Article 2(a)). The Portuguese Civil Code also no longer recognises the possibility of children becoming emancipated through marriage, i.e. acquiring the same rights as an adult.

The 1976 Portuguese Constitution recognises a child's right to protection by society and the state, ensuring their full development. However, comprehensive reforms to children's rights were enacted following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 12 September 1990 through Presidential Decree 49/90. This reform prioritised the best interests of the child within a legal framework based on three key laws:

- i) Law 166/99 of 14 September, which established that children aged 12 to 16 are recognised as subjects with judicial rights.
- ii) Law 147/99 of 1 September, also known as the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People at Risk, which governs state intervention in cases where a child's safety, health, education or development is endangered due to the actions or negligence of their parents, legal guardians or caregivers.
- iii) Decree-Law 98/98 of 18 April, which established the National Committee for Children and Young People at Risk, as well as local commissions at municipal level, to promote children's rights and protect those at risk.

According to Law 147/99, a child is considered to be at risk (or, in a direct translation from Portuguese, in danger) if they are found to be in any of the following situations:

- (a) Is abandoned or living alone;
- (b) suffers physical, psychological or sexual abuse;

- (c) Lacks appropriate care or affection for their age and personal circumstances;
- (d) is forced into excessive or inappropriate activities or work that undermines their dignity, education or development;
- (e) is exposed, directly or indirectly, to behaviour that severely impacts their safety or emotional well-being;
- (f) Engages in behaviours or activities that seriously harm their health, safety, education or development without appropriate intervention from parents, legal representatives or guardians to prevent such risks.

Following the publication of Law No. 39/2025 on 1 April, Article 4 of the Law on the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger was amended. Article 3 of this law now considers submission to child, early or forced marriage, or similar unions, as well as acts intended to facilitate such unions, even if they are not carried out, to be a factor of danger.

Until the legislative change, since marriage gave the child legal majority and emancipation, the Child and Youth Protection Commissions had no authority to intervene, only when this resulted in the child early school-leaving, thus jeopardising their right to the child's education.

Following its ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Portugal criminalised forced marriage in 2015 with the introduction of the 38th amendment to its Penal Code. Furthermore, Law 83/2015 designated female genital mutilation (FGM) as an independent criminal offence, introduced the crime of stalking, and amended the legal provisions relating to rape, sexual coercion, and sexual harassment.

According to Article 1 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, forced marriage is considered a violent crime as it intentionally restricts personal freedom, carrying a maximum

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penalty of five years' imprisonment. (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 27) Consequently, victims may be eligible for advance compensation under Law No. 104/2009 of 14 September. Furthermore, as forced marriage is considered a public offence, similar to domestic violence and FGM, criminal proceedings do not require a complaint to be filed by the victim. Instead, criminal proceedings can be initiated if the Public Prosecutor's Office becomes aware of the incident through its own investigation, via the police or other officials, or through a complaint from any individual. (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 27)

II.1.3. National policies covering early marriage and early motherhood

Portugal published its First National Plan to Combat Domestic Violence in 1999. As part of the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND) 2018-2030, the country is currently implementing the Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (PAVMD). The Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) is coordinating this initiative. One of the strategic objectives of the PAVMD is to ensure that all cases of FGM, as well as child, early, and forced marriages, are identified within the reporting and protection system and subject to appropriate follow-up processes.⁵

The ENIND Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence recognises the multidimensional nature of disadvantage and the intersections established between sex-based discrimination and stereotypes underpinned by factors such as ethnicity. This recognition highlights the need for responses that address the specific needs of certain groups of women, such as Roma women. To this end, ENIND establishes links with other strategic documents, including the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities.

⁵ Available at: [PAVMD](#).

In 2013, the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities (ENICC) was approved for the first time. Created by Council of Ministers Resolution (RCM) No. 25/2013, it aimed specifically at Roma people in Portugal. Council of Ministers Resolution 36/2023 extends the validity period of the ENICC until 2023.

One of ENICC's strategic priorities (priority 4) is to promote equality between women and men in measures to integrate Roma people. Objective 4.1 encourages and supports the participation of Roma girls and women in professional, civic, and political life, while objective 4.2 strengthens the prevention of and fight against all forms of violence against Roma women and girls. Objective 5.1, on the other hand, highlights the need to enhance schools' capacity to integrate children from these communities more effectively, with a view to achieving the educational success of Roma girls and boys.

The National Strategy for Children's Rights 2021–2024 (ENDC 2021–2024) was approved by the Council of Ministers on 18 December 2020 (Resolution No. 112). It is organised around five strategic priorities.

Priority 4 of the 2023-2024 Action Plan,⁶ *“Preventing and Combating Violence against Children and Young People”*, includes the *‘objective of preventing and combatting all forms of violence perpetrated against or by children and young people, including exploitation, trafficking, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation’*. One of the planned actions under this objective is to provide professionals with training on early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Following the establishment of the Working Group on Preventing and Combating Child, Early and Forced Marriage in 2024, the White Paper on Preventing and Combating Child,

⁶ Available at: <https://www.cnpdpj.gov.pt/documents/10182/111710/ENDC+Plano+bianual+-+2023+-+2024/a68ff136-a232-4262-a3a7-05a6daa693fb>.

Early and Forced Marriage was published. This document contains a number of recommendations, including:

- Implement integrated and coordinated policies that prioritise respect for individuals' dignity and physical and psychological integrity.
- Gather up-to-date, consistent and regular data to accurately understand these phenomena within the country.
- Invest in specialised, comprehensive protection and support services for victims.
- Introduce prevention measures that empower girls and women, actively involving and engaging the whole of society, especially high-risk or vulnerable communities.
- Enhance the legal framework to acknowledge and ensure children's right to protection and holistic development.

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II. 2. What it is known about early marriage and early motherhood

II. 2.1. What figures are saying

According to the Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs and United Nations Population Fund, Portugal has one of the lowest adolescent birth rates (per 1,000 women aged 15-19 and 10-14 years) in the world: 5,75.⁷ This is also one of the lowest rates among the European Union (EU).

The prevalence, risk factors and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Portugal have been the subject of several studies. According to estimated data, there were 2,491 births to mothers aged between 11 and 19 years in 2014, corresponding to a rate of 4.65 per 1,000. This number fell to 2,208 (4.16 per 1,000) in 2016 and to 2,028 (3.88 per 1,000) in 2018, indicating a downward trend in teenage pregnancies.⁸

Between 2012 and 2022, 1,051 girls and 303 boys aged 16 or 17 entered into their first marriages in Portugal. According to the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat), who reported this data in the White Paper on Preventing and Combating Early and Forced Child Marriage, girls are disproportionately affected by early marriage compared to boys. The paper states that *'in total, 1,354 children were legally married in Portugal between 2012 and 2022, before their 18th birthday'* (GTCIPF, 2024, p. 25), as can be seen below.

⁷ Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs and United Nations Population Fund – [processed](#) by Our World in Data. Available at: [Adolescent birth rate, 15-19 year olds, 2023](#).

⁸ Barbosa, Melissa *et al.* (2020). A realidade da gravidez em Portugal. Instituto Politécnico de Bragança.

Figure 1 - People who married for the first time, by sex and age, in Portugal 2012-2022

Year	Girls		Boys		Total 16-17 years
	16 years	17 years	16 years	17 years	
2012	53	55	1	11	120
2013	37	38	3	5	83
2014	36	22	3	5	66
2015	42	36	3	8	89
2016	42	35	14	6	97
2017	59	35	15	17	126
2018	71	39	18	24	152
2019	77	37	27	20	161
2020	44	23	10	15	92
2021	94	29	25	19	167
2022	106	41	36	18	201
Total (2012-2022)	661	390	155	148	1354

Source: Livro Branco sobre Prevenção e Combate aos Casamentos Infantis Precoces e Forçados / Eurostat.

The figure above shows that the number of child marriage has varied irregularly over the years considered. After dropping until 2015, there was a reversal of this trend between 2016 and 2019. However, in 2020, there was another sharp drop, most likely due to the pandemic. However, in 2021, the figures show an increase, with 2022 having the highest figures of the analysed period (201), particularly among 16-year-old girls (106).

Although the available statistics are important, it is worth bearing in mind that they may underestimate the prevalence of early marriage in Portugal. This underreporting is due to informal unions, particularly within certain social groups, where 'marriage' is not officially registered, but rather exists as a de facto relationship. Such informal arrangements often lack legal recognition, leading to concerns regarding inheritance,

citizenship and social acknowledgement. Consequently, individuals in such unions may be vulnerable in ways that are different from people in formally recognised marriages.

II. 2.2. About the reality of early marriage and early motherhood

In 2024, the Working Group for Preventing and Combating Child, Early and Forced Marriages conducted an online survey targeting a variety of institutions with relevant expertise. The aim was to gain a more in-depth understanding of these issues in Portugal, taking into account three areas: the characteristics of those involved in child, early and forced marriages; identifying the reasons that lead to these marriages; and the consequences of these marriages.

The main conclusions on the three areas identified are presented below:

(i) Characteristics of those affected:

- Predominantly female.
- The majority are Portuguese nationals.
- The most common age gap between couples is less than five years.
- More than half have children as a result of child, early and forced marriage.

It should be emphasised that the collected data shows cases involving children under the age of 15, particularly girls (121 between the ages of 10 and 14), which makes their protection urgent.

ii) Reasons for marriage:

Although the specific results of Portugal's Working Group for Preventing and Combating Child, Early, and Forced Marriages' 2024 questionnaire have not been publicly disclosed, existing research identifies several key factors contributing to child and early marriages in Portugal. These factors include:

- The need to control sexual behaviour.
- The existence of restrictive social norms relating to the role of women.
- The need to maintain marriage within an ethnic, cultural or religious group.
- A desire for independence/autonomy on the part of those affected.

iii) Effects

- Dropping out of school.
- Pregnancy.
- Social control and isolation.

The issue of adolescent pregnancy has predominantly been examined from a medical standpoint. A 2010⁹ study highlighted that early pregnancy poses health risks for adolescents, including an increased risk of anaemia, the effects of which can persist for months after childbirth.

Conversely, the risks for babies '*begin even before birth, with small-for-gestational-age foetuses and low birth weight being more common*' (Brigadeiro, 2010: 14).

⁹ Brigadeiro, Diana (2010). *Gravidez na Adolescência- A realidade portuguesa*. Tese de mestrado

Another study¹⁰ concluded that adolescents are more likely to suffer from perinatal depression. This has consequences for the provision of care, including less adherence to prenatal care, inadequate nutrition, and a weaker bond between mother and child.

Furthermore, one of the greatest concerns regarding depression is its potential to lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

A study focusing on the factors influencing teenage pregnancy¹¹ reveals the following:

- Pregnant teenagers tend to come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and be part of certain population groups. In these environments, teenage pregnancy is often seen as a way for young women to gain social status, independence and responsibility. Conversely, in certain communities, sexuality is associated with marriage and procreation. In these communities, *'sexual initiation and the beginning of procreation coincide in time, so that early motherhood is not only well accepted, but even desired.'* (Lopes, 2021: 263)
- The majority of pregnant teenagers have a low level of education and a high failure rate, with a significant proportion dropping out of school. These results align with previous studies¹² that have highlighted the low academic aspirations and limited professional opportunities perceived by most pregnant teenagers. Additionally, these studies have revealed that families with a low socioeconomic status often undervalue education and encourage their children to enter the workforce at an early age.

¹⁰ Carvalho, Paula (2012). Fatores de influência individuais, psicossociais e relacionais para a ocorrência de gravidez na adolescência em Portugal Continental. Available at: [Fatores de influência individuais, psicossociais e relacionais para a ocorrência de gravidez na adolescência em Portugal Continental](#)

¹¹ Lopes, Joana (2021). Gravidez na adolescência: fatores de risco e complicações materno-fetais. Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar, Universidade do Porto

¹² Figueiredo B, Pacheco A, Costa R. Depression during pregnancy and the postpartum period in adolescent and adult Portuguese mothers. *Arch Womens Ment Health* 2007

- Pregnant teenagers tend to be disinterested and unmotivated when it comes to school and continuing their studies.
- The partners of teenagers are also characterised by having low educational qualifications.
- The same study emphasises that most pregnant teenagers are not in employment, and those who tend to be in insecure jobs such as cleaning, catering or market trading.

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II.3. Roma communities in Portugal

II.3.1. General characterisation of Roma communities

As this project focuses on Roma communities, a brief characterisation of their living conditions in Portugal is needed.

The Roma community has been present in Portugal for more than five hundred years. Originally from India, they arrived on the Iberian Peninsula (the Kalé group) after travelling through various regions and adopting elements of the cultures they encountered along the way.

This means that despite having a common cultural identity, the Roma population in Europe is not unitary, but made up of different communities.

Over the centuries, prejudices and stereotypes against the Roma have given rise to legislative documents characterised as initiating persecutory practices, such as banning entry on pain of public flogging and banishment, executing those who refused to leave the territory, removing children from the age of nine, banning those who took in Roma people and prohibiting the use of the original language (Caló).

Although the 1686 Law began to tolerate the presence of Roma born in Portugal, in 1800, prohibitions against nomadism were reinforced. Citizenship was recognised for Roma born in Portugal in 1822, but it was not until the revision of the Penal Code in 1852 that being Roma was no longer considered a crime.

The exact number of Portuguese Roma in Portugal is unknown, primarily due to legal restrictions on collecting personal information based on ethnicity. Consequently, the existing information is essentially based on estimates. The latest available figures are from the Council of Europe, which estimated in 2022 that the Roma population in

Portugal would be around 52,000, accounting for less than 1% of the resident population.

Despite the challenges of accurately quantifying the Portuguese Roma population, several studies have been conducted that enable us to identify the living conditions that lead to poverty and social exclusion. The main elements are:

i) Difficulties in accessing the right to education

In the national study of Roma communities (Mendes, 2014), 27% of respondents were illiterate; 19% did not complete the first cycle of basic education; and 7.2% completed the third cycle, but fewer than 3% completed secondary education or a higher level (2.8%).

According to the 'School Profile of Roma Communities' study by the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics, the retention and dropout rates for Roma children in the 2018/19 school year were as follows:

- 11% in the first cycle of basic education (EB)
- 21% in the second cycle of EB
- 19% in the third cycle
- 13% in secondary education.

According to the same study, these percentages represent an improvement on those in 2016/17. However, contrary to the situation in the general population, Roma girls face the greatest obstacles to schooling. The vast majority only attend the first cycle of basic education, as many families believe that girls should stay home and prepare for marriage once they reach adolescence. (Abrantes, 2016: 50)

A 2023 study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)¹³ found that 34% of Roma children in Portugal, aged between three and compulsory school age, attend preschool. This figure is lower than the 42% of the total Roma population surveyed across ten countries and significantly lower than the 92% of the Portuguese population as a whole. The same study also found that only 10% of Portuguese Roma aged between 20 and 24 years had completed secondary education, compared to 27% in the other surveyed countries and 85% of the Portuguese population as a whole.

ii) Precarious integration into the labour market

According to the FRA same study from 2023, 31% of Roma people in Portugal surveyed aged between 20 and 64 years defined themselves as 'workers', having worked full-time, part-time, done odd jobs, or been self-employed on a permanent or occasional basis in the four weeks before the questionnaire was administered. However, this percentage drops to 18% for women, making Portugal the second country (after Greece) with the lowest percentage of Roma women participating in professional activity. Conversely, Portugal has the highest percentage of people claiming to have experienced discrimination in the workplace.

This dimension is also addressed in the national study of Roma communities (Mendes, 2014). The study recognises the existence of various discriminatory barriers that prevent Roma people from accessing employment. At the same time, there are gaps in Roma people's employability skills, largely due to their limited education.

iii) Persistence of precarious housing conditions

FRA study also found that Roma populations in Europe generally live in precarious housing conditions and face serious obstacles when looking for a home on the private

¹³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – FRA, Roma Survey 2021 – Main results. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

iv) Challenges to accessing healthcare

Their perceptions of health have a significant impact on their well-being. Rather than adopting healthy lifestyle habits to prevent disease, this is often viewed as a matter of religious belief, in the hope that illness will never occur (Correia, 2011: 44)¹⁴. Health is merely perceived as the absence of disease; when illness does arise, it is seen as a debilitating condition immediately linked to death.



v) *Discrimination and poverty*

The 2023 Eurobarometer report on discrimination¹⁵ reveals that 59% of people interviewed in Portugal believe that discrimination based on ethnic origin is widespread in Portuguese society. However, when asked about discrimination against the Roma community specifically, 86% of respondents believed that it was a very widespread form of discrimination.

Nevertheless, reports of discrimination remain rare. In the 2021 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey about Roma in Europe, published in 2023, conducted across ten EU countries, only 2% of Portuguese Roma respondents stated that they had filed a complaint after experiencing discrimination.

The 2023 FRA study also revealed a strong sense of discrimination among Roma people in Portugal:

- 34% of individuals claim they were treated unfairly at school, in comparison to 11% of the global population.
- Portugal also has the highest percentage of people who have experienced discrimination when looking for housing in the private rental sector, which makes them highly dependent on state support. According to the same study, 77% of people in Portugal faced such discrimination, compared to an average of 24% across all countries surveyed.

¹⁵ European Commission. (2023). *Discrimination in the European Union* (Special Eurobarometer 535). Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2972_99_2_sp535_eng?locale=en

In general, health professionals report greater adherence to pregnancy planning and monitoring among young Roma women (and men), as well as a more positive attitude towards preventive maternal and child health and postponing the first pregnancy and limiting the number of children (Allen, 2013¹⁶; Teixeira, 2013¹⁷).

¹⁷ Teixeira, Nuno (2013), “Relato de práticas – discussão de projetos de intervenção: trabalho com pessoas Roma em Matosinhos”, in Magano, Olga e Mendes, Manuela (orgs.), *Ciganos Portugueses: olhares cruzados e interdisciplinares em torno de políticas sociais e projetos de intervenção social e cultural*, Lisboa, Universidade Aberta (e-book).

III. Listening Roma people – Field work research with Roma women on early marriage and early motherhood

In addition to the legal and policy framework of the subject, this national report also presents findings gathered directly from Roma women through interviews. The primary aim of these interviews was to gather insights that help describe and analyse the practice of early marriage and early motherhood within Roma communities as it is foreseen in the project. These conversations provided valuable perspectives on the consequences of these practices, considering the various dimensions of women's lives.

In general, according to the evaluation of all partners of the Project, the interview process was satisfactory/very satisfactory and went as expected. The tools used were also evaluated positively.

In Portugal, the process of interview Roma women was carried out by CESIS and CooperActiva, both members of the project partnership, with the participation of ADEIMA - Associação para o Desenvolvimento Integrado de Matosinhos.

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III.1. The Roma Influencers Network Research Methodology

In Portugal, the project conducted a total of 50 interviews with Roma women. The target group consisted of Roma women aged 18 and over who were either married and/or had children. In order to reach this number, purposive sampling was the main method used to select participants. In addition, snowball sampling was used in some cases, where interviewees were asked to suggest other Roma women who might be willing to participate.

Efforts were made to include women from different communities and neighbourhoods to reflect a wide range of experiences and contexts. The approach to Roma women was based on previously existing contacts and built on the relationship already established between CooperActiva and ADEIMA with some communities. Throughout the interview process, the principles of non-discrimination, privacy and anonymity were strictly adhered to. To create a more comfortable and trusting environment for the respondents, all interviews were conducted by women.

Before and during the interviews, participants were fully informed about the purpose of the interview, how the data would be used, and their rights—including the right to skip any question or to end the interview at any time. The time and/or location of each interview were arranged in advance in consultation with the respondent.

In Portugal, the interviews were carried out between December 2024 and February 2025.

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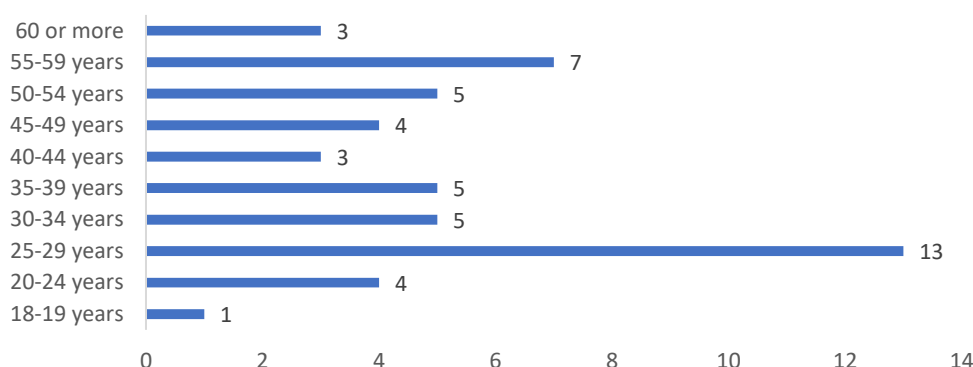


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III. 2. Characterisation of the participants in the interviews

As mentioned above, a total of 50 interviews were conducted with Roma women in Portugal. The women interviewed were of a wide range of ages. However, the most significant age groups were 25–29 (13 women) and 55–59 (seven women). The average age is 39.2 years; the youngest woman is 19 and the oldest is 66.

Figure 2 -Age group of the Roma women interviewed (Absolut numbers)

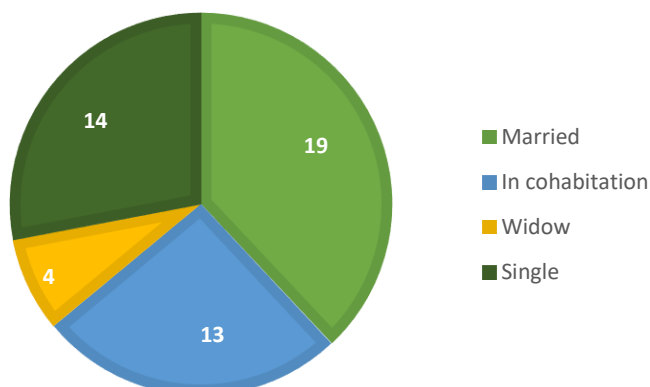


Of the 50 women interviewed, 40 (80%) live in urban areas (Lisbon and Porto), while 10 live in rural environments.

Most of the housing is apartments or houses in social housing neighbourhoods (78%, or 39 women). Only one woman reported living in a makeshift house. The remainder live in apartments or houses (not social housing) in conditions similar to those of the general population (rented or owned).

Regarding the marital status of the respondents 38% (19 women) of the respondents are married; 26% (13 women) are cohabiting with their partners. Four women (8%) are widow and 14 (28%) are single.

Figure 3 - Marital status of the Roma women interviewed (Absolut numbers)



The majority of women — 72%, or 36 women — live with their husbands or partners, either with or without children. Seven of these also live with other relatives. Seven (14%) live alone with their children, and seven others live in an extended family without a partner or husband.

III. 3. What women say about (early) marriage¹⁸

Of all the women who were married (including widows) or in cohabiting relationships, which constitutes the majority of the interviewees, 58% (21) said that their marriages/unions were celebrated according to Roma tradition. A total of 32 of the women interviewed (88.9%) said that their husbands or partners are also Roma. Only four women have non-Roma husbands or partners.

On the other hand, regarding how the Roma women interviewed met their husbands/partners, a total of nine women referred a family arrangement. The same number of women knew them from their childhood. Other situations of how these women met their husbands/partners were through friends or other relatives.

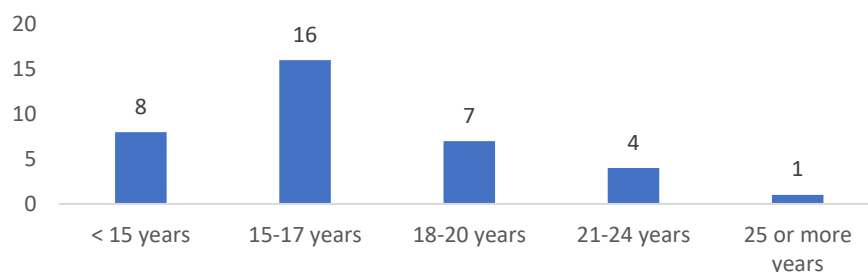
These figures highlight the significance of marriage, and more specifically, the union between two individuals, as a defining aspect of identity deeply rooted in traditional practices. Similarly, marriage involves not only the couple, but also their families, who play a decisive role in choosing a partner. Even when marriages are not 'arranged', they tend to take place within the same social group – note that few of the women interviewed (4) married outside of their community.

As the figure shows, most part of women in the survey had marriage at a very early stage in their lives. In fact, from the Figure below it possible to see that most of the Roma women interviewed married/came together in their underage (68.6% - 24 women). The most prevalent age group is the one between 15 to 17 years old - around 46% of women married when they were in this age group but, in addition, it should be considered that 8 women married/start living in partnership had less than 15 years.

¹⁸ Only responses from married (including widows) or in cohabitation women, i.e. 36, are included in this section.

The average age of women at the time of marriage/union was 17.1 years.

Figure 4 - Age of marriage/start of cohabitation (Absolut numbers)

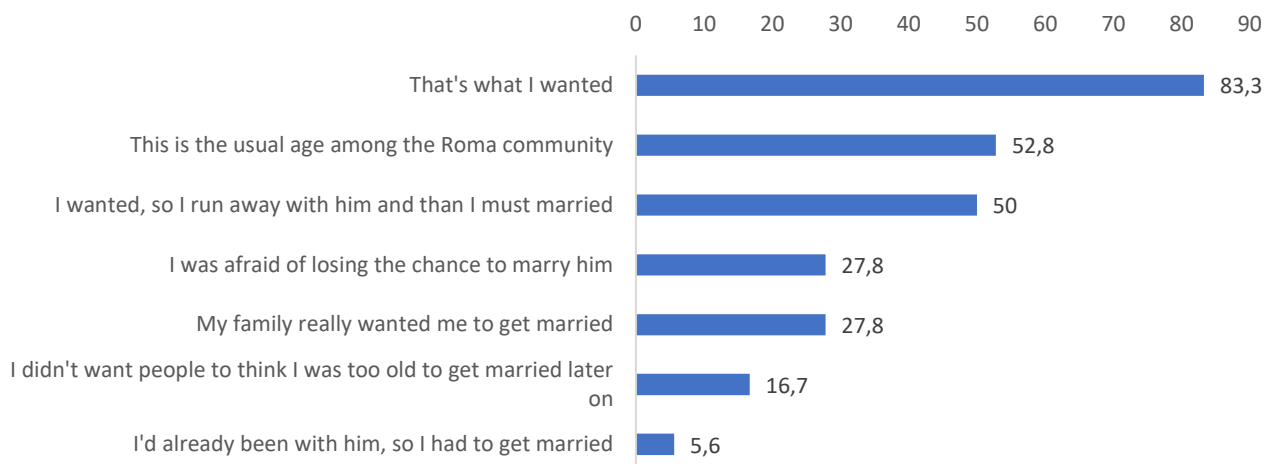


The reasons given for getting married or living together at that age mostly relate to women's willingness (83.3% — 30 women), but also to the fact that it is common practice in Roma communities (52.8% — 19 women). This suggests that personal 'choice' is also shaped by a widely accepted behavioural norm.

There are also cases where they run away with their (future) partner (18 women, 50%). After this, marriage (should) happens as a way of maintaining family honour.

Some people had been with their husbands or partners before getting married and had to marry them because of that (27.8%, or 10 people). Perhaps this is why the same percentage (27.8%) said that their families really wanted them to get married, since in these cases the loss of virginity before marriage – an essential element of female morality and a direct reflection of the family's reputation – should be rectified by formalising the union.

Figure 5 - Reasons for marrying at this age (%)¹⁹



However, 52.8% (19) of Roma women said they would wait a little longer before getting married. This answer was predominantly given by those who married at the youngest ages, i.e. under 15. Conversely, almost 42% (15) of respondents said they would still marry at the same age. Only two women said they would choose to marry at the youngest age.

The women who were interviewed talked about the different ways their families had reacted to their marriages or unions.

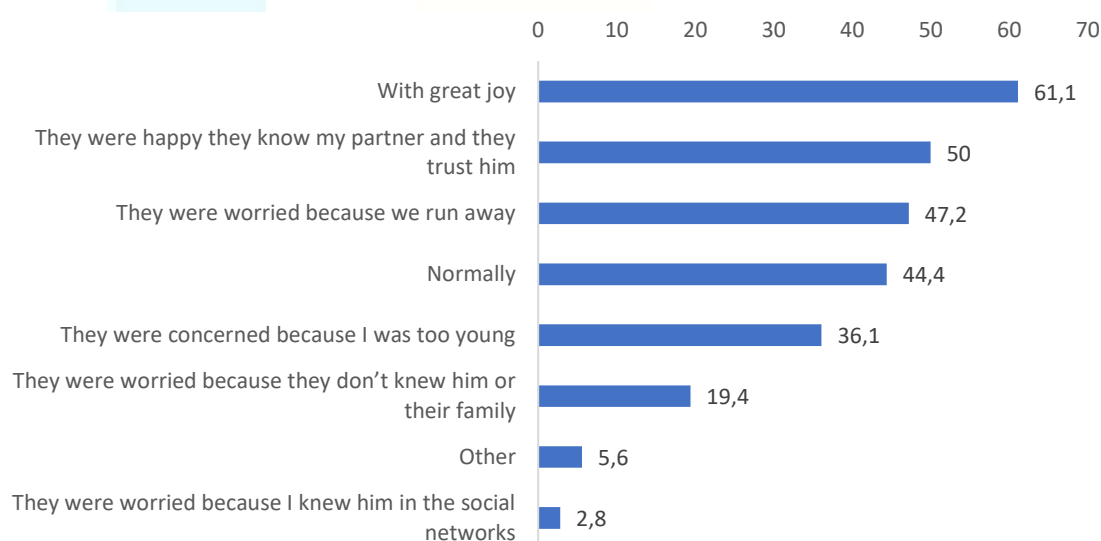
In general, it can be said that the marriage/union has been well received: 61.1% (22 respondents) said that their families were happy and joyful. This is partly because they already knew and trusted the man in some cases.

However, some concerns and disagreements also emerge from the answers. The parents' concerns stem from their daughter's age at the time of the wedding, as they considered her too young (36.1% - 13). In other cases (18.4% - 7), it was because they

¹⁹ Multiple answers.

did not know the groom and his family well enough. Running away was also a cause for concern (47.2%, or 17 people), because it escapes family control: *For example, I got married at 19, but my daughter ran away at 15 to get married, which I didn't want. Her husband lived next door to us and they communicated without my knowledge* (Roma woman, 58 years old).

Figure 6 – Family reactions to marriage (%)²⁰



Before getting married, 41.7% (15) of the Roma female respondents were in education; a total of 36.1% (13) of the women were looking for a home and family; four were in employment.

It is not surprising that a large percentage of the interviewees (94.4% - 34) considered that their marriage changed their lives.

These women consider their marriage to be a turning point for many reasons. Firstly, it meant a change in family circumstances: 75.8% (25 women) said that they had to leave

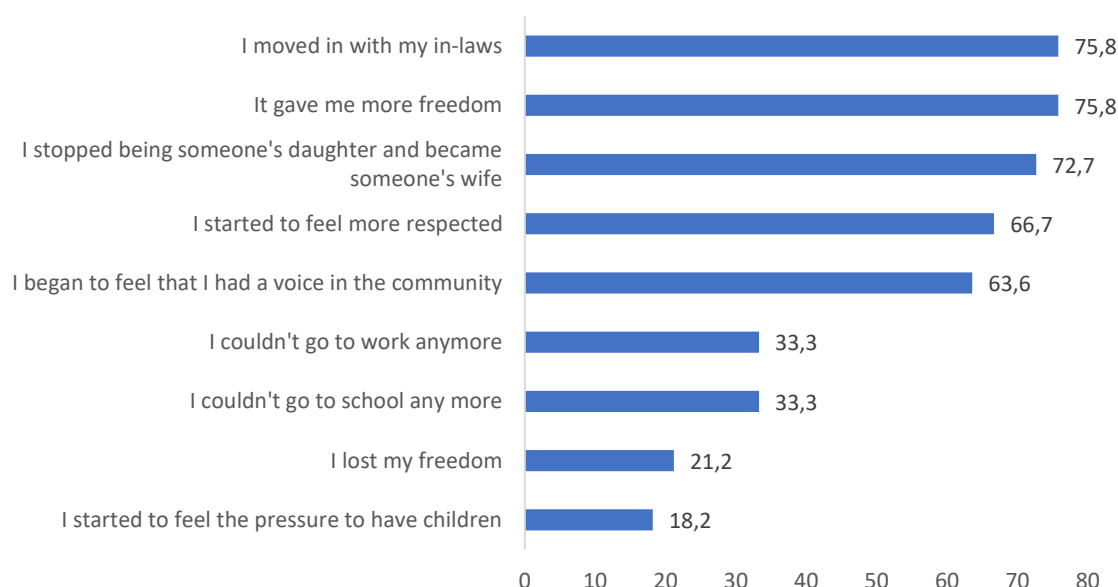
²⁰ Multiple answers.

their homes and start living with their in-laws. The same percentage said that marriage gave them more freedom.

It was also mentioned that a change in the lives of married women relates to their status within the community. They became someone's wife and were no longer seen as someone's daughter (24 women, or 72.7%). This perception may represent a change. However, the idea that within the Roma community, women are still often defined through their relationships to others — as daughters, wives, or mothers - seems to persist.

The change in status is followed by an increase in respect (66.7% to 22) and an increase in influence within the community (63.6% to 21).

Figure 7 – Perceptions of changes in life after marriage (%)²¹



²¹ Multiple answers.

A total of 19 women (56% of those who are or were married or living with a partner) pointed out what they had lost through marriage:

- giving up studying (33.3%, or 11 women);
- stopped working (33.3%, 11 women);
- lost freedom (21.2%, 7 women);
- feeling under pressure to have children (18.2%, or 6 women).

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III. 4. Motherhood

As previous said all the Roma women respondents have children.

From the interviews, it can be concluded that the average number of children per woman is 2.8. In light of this information, it is important to note that, according to the National Institute for Statistics, the average number of children per woman in Portugal in 2023 is 1.44.²²

In addition, 60% of women (30) have two or three children, while 28% (14) have four or five. Three women have only one child, which is the same number as those with six or more children.

In addition to a lack of information about sexual and reproductive health, and the persistence of cultural barriers to accessing contraceptives, having children is seen as a way of preserving family values in Roma communities.

Fertility is highly valued, and motherhood is a status symbol and a marker of identity for Roma women.

As mentioned above, most of these women got married at a very early age and consequently became mothers at a young age too. The average age at which these women had their first child was 19.02 years. According to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) for 2023, the average age of women at the birth of their first child in Portugal is currently 30.2 years.

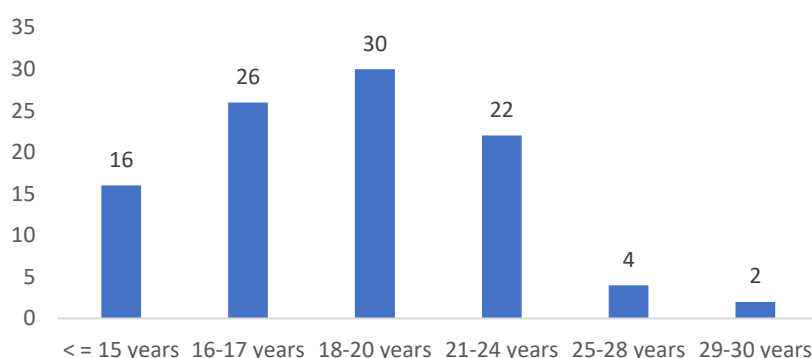
In addition to the average figure, it is important to emphasise the percentage of women who gave birth to their first child during their teenage years. As can be seen in the figure below, 42% (21) of the interviewees had their first child while still a minor. The youngest

²² Available at: https://nascer.pt/indicadores/?utm_source=

mother was 14 years old (4 interviewees) and the oldest was 29 years old (1 interviewee).

A cause for concern is that teenage pregnancy has not decreased among the women interviewed over the generations. In other words, 40 per cent of the older women (aged 50 and over) had their first child before the age of 18. Among the younger women (aged 30 and under), this figure rises to 58 per cent (11 women).

Figure 8 – Age of women at the birth of their first child (%)

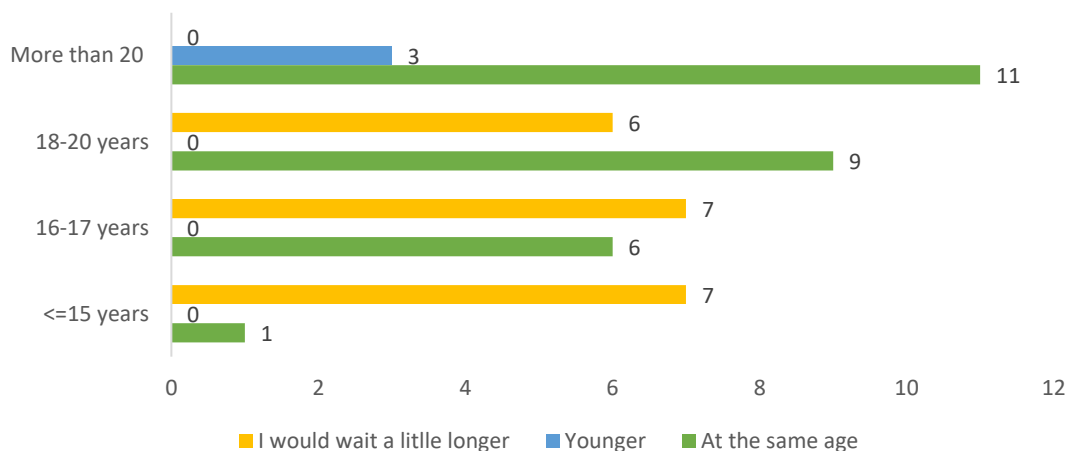


The fact that most pregnancies were unplanned (60% - 20) indicates that the use of family planning was not usual.

Perhaps for this reason, 54% of Portuguese Roma interviewees said that, if it were today, they would have their child at the same age. However, 40% (20 people) would prefer to wait a little longer.

Those who gave birth up to 15 years would prefer to wait a little longer. Those who had their children at an older age would choose to become mothers at a younger age if they were starting again today.

Figure 9 – Age preference for first-time motherhood by age group of Roma women (Absolut numbers)



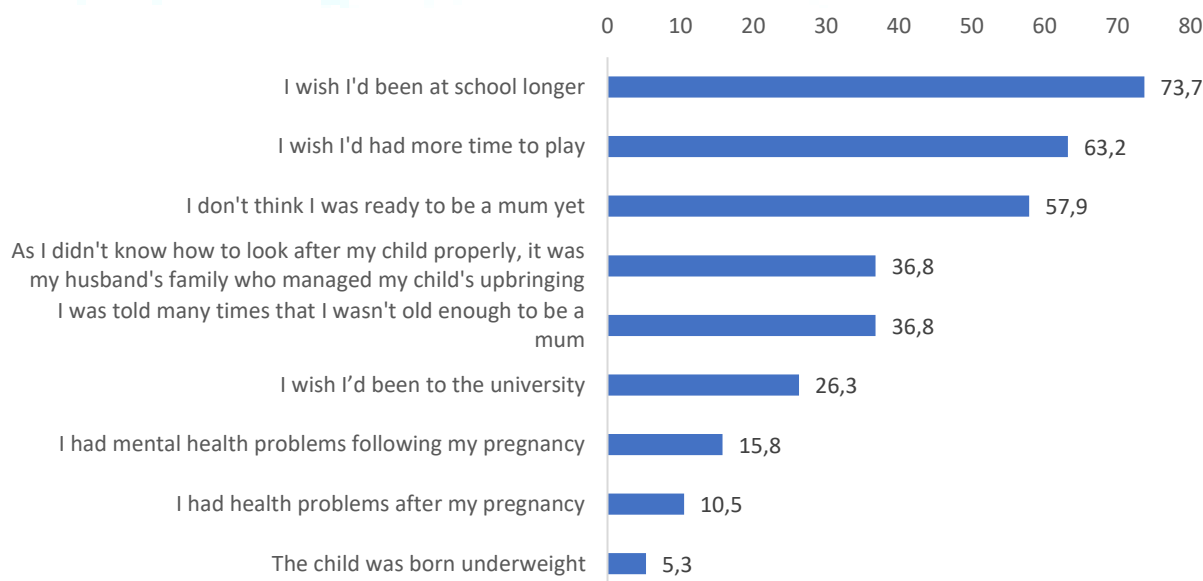
For those who would prefer to wait a little longer, the main reason is the desire to continue their education, which was interrupted by motherhood (73.7% - 14). Additionally, some wish to enjoy their childhood and youth *having more time to play* (63.2% - 15), which is no longer possible after having a child.

In addition to these two main reasons, some women expressed a lack of preparedness for motherhood (57.9% - 11). In some cases, women considered themselves too young to become a mother (36.8%, or 7 women), and/or they did not know how to look after their children properly (36.8%, or 7 women).

The negative impact of becoming a mother at an early age on the health of these women can also be identified, as five of the women mentioned health problems, three of which were mental health issues.

Finally, we can see that becoming pregnant at an early age has cut off some women's dreams and altered their future plans, with 26.3% (5 women) saying they would have liked to go to university.

Figure 10 – Reasons for wanting to have children later in life (%)²³

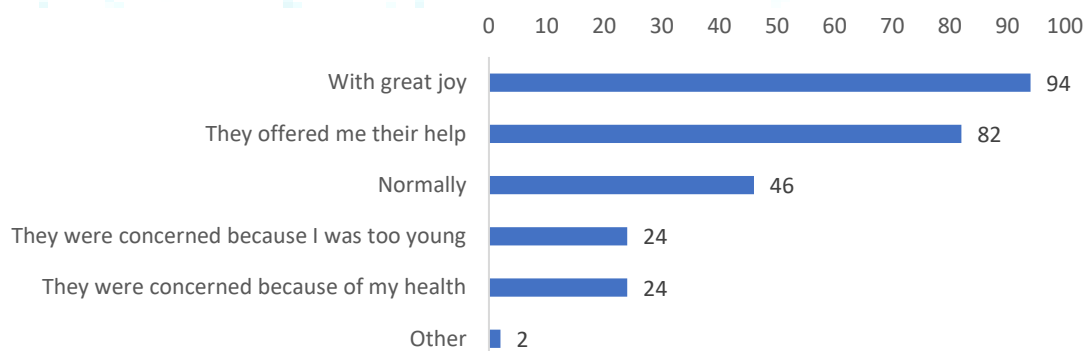


The idea that the birth of a child is an extremely important event for a family is undeniable. As previously mentioned, children ensure the continuity of family and community values, and couples are expected to have their own. The interviewees' responses convey the joy their families felt about their pregnancies.

In fact, most Portuguese Roma women interviewed said that families' reactions were most closely associated with happiness (94% - 47). They also identified helping with the care of the newborn as something they did (82% - 41).

²³ Multiple answers.

Figure 11 – Reaction of the family to the pregnancy (%)²⁴



Regarding the help received after birth, 88% of women responded positively. The main person who helped with childcare was the husband or partner (35 respondents, accounting for 79.5% of responses), which could indicate a change in the role of male within families. Mothers also played an important role, accounting for 63.6% (28 respondents) of responses. Husbands'/partners' families were also considered a significant source of help after the birth of the women's children (56.8%, or 25 people). Also, their sisters were an important element to provide help (29.5% - 13).

It is also important to note that 12% of interviewees (six people) received no help following the birth of their child. Four of these were women who had their children at 18 years old or younger.

²⁴ Multiple answers.

III. 5. Became a mother - feelings changes

For the group of women interviewed, motherhood emerges as a great joy (98% - 49) but also as a great responsibility (90% - 45).

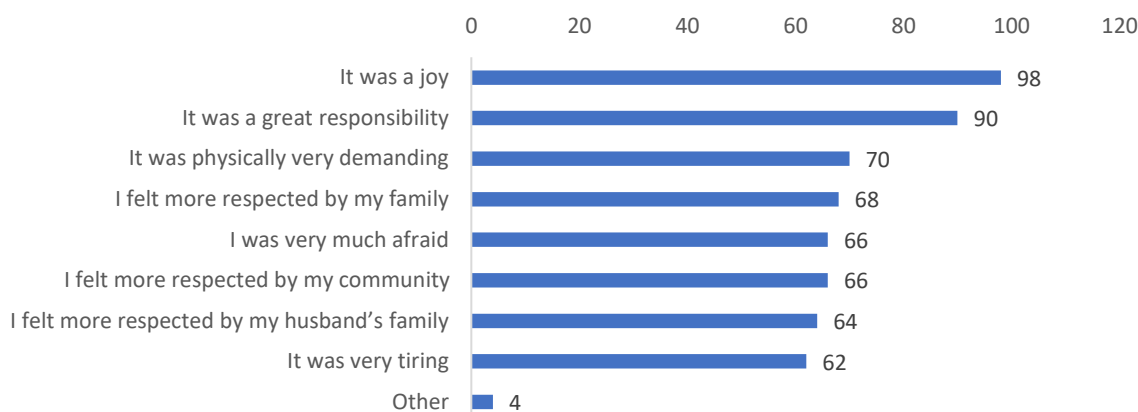
For most of these women, becoming a mother is very demanding, both physically (62% - 31 women) and psychologically (70% - 35). Alongside with this fragile psychological state, some women also expressed fear about this new phase of their lives (66% or 33 women): *What if I didn't my son well? What would they say?*

However, becoming a mother among the Roma community can also be seen as a way of achieving a higher status. In this regard, some women expressed that they felt more respected not only by their family (68% - 34), but also by their husband's family (64% - 32) and the Roma community in general (66%).

In fact, studies have shown that, as well as being seen as a milestone in the transition to adulthood, motherhood is often associated with prestige and acceptance within the community. Women who become mothers at a young age are often recognised for their ability to care for and educate subsequent generations, as well as pass on cultural values (Magano, 2010).²⁵

²⁵ Magano, O. (2010). *Ciganos e educação: A escola e o (des)encontro com os ciganos*. Lisboa: ACIDI.

Figure 12 - What it was like to become a mother (%)²⁶



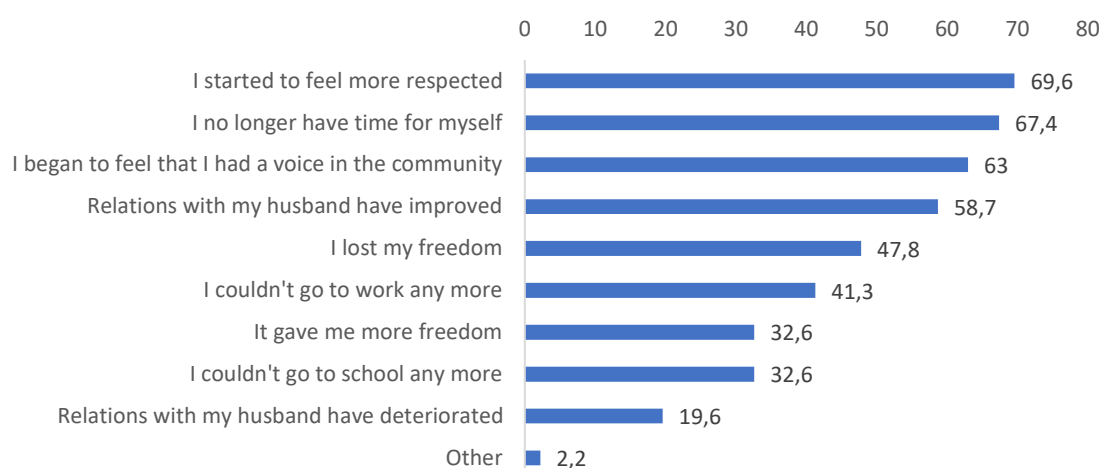
As can be seen in the figure below, there is a range of responses, which alternate between positive and less positive.

Another important change was in terms of family relationships. The responses indicated that the arrival of a baby had improved relations between couples (58.7% — 27), although the opposite was also true on a much smaller scale (19.6% — 9).

²⁶ Multiple answers.

Leaving school (32.6% -15 women) and/or jobs (41.3% - 19 women) were also mentioned as changes that had a negative impact on their future lives and autonomy.

Figure 13 – Changes in life after motherhood (%)²⁷



²⁷ Multiple answers.

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III. 6. The relevance of information

Becoming a mother does not necessarily mean having all the information needed to manage this event in the best possible way, considering the wellbeing of both mother and child.

However, in the case of the Portuguese Roma women interviewees, the most part (84% - 42 women) considered had the adequate information about pregnancy. Only seven considered themselves uninformed.

Regarding information about caring for a child, 92% (46 women) said that they had all the necessary information on this issue. The importance of learning within the family cannot be overstated. Many of these women were already caring for their siblings in their families of origin, a practice widely regarded as the most effective learning strategy in such contexts.

According to the 2015-2019 European Perinatal Health Report, published by the Euro-Peristat network²⁸, the majority of pregnant women in Europe have access to medical care during pregnancy. Of the Roma women interviewed, a large percentage had attended hospital/medical appointments before giving birth (92%- 46 women). Only four women (8%) did not attend these appointments. The main reasons for not going to not attend to those appointments were not knowing how to go; not realising how important it was; not having someone to accompany them; and feeling ashamed.

Taking into consideration attendance at antenatal classes, although the percentage of women who took part in these classes was much lower at 32% (16), meaning that the majority did not receive any preparation before giving birth.

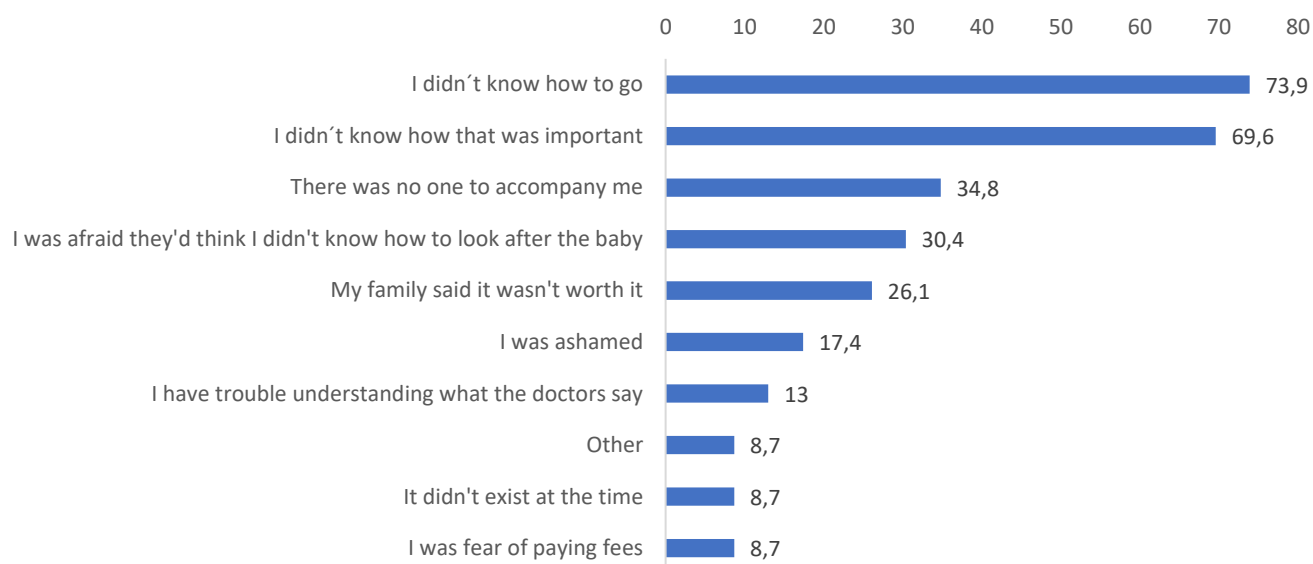
²⁸ Euro-Peristat Project (2022). European Perinatal Health Report: Core indicators of the health and care of pregnant women and babies in Europe from 2015 to 2019. <https://www.europeristat.com/publications/european-perinatal-health-report-2015-2019/>

The main reasons given were that these women did not know how to proceed (73.9% - 17 women) and that they were not aware of the importance of participating in these sessions (69.6% - 16 women). Although fewer in number, it is still important to mention the reasons that intersect: *I didn't have anyone to accompany me* (34,8%) and *my family didn't think it was important* (26%).

On the other hand, some women still avoid this kind of follow-up because they are afraid it could suggest that they do not know how to care for their baby (30,4%).

Few, but particularly relevant seem to be those who said they were ashamed (17%).

Figure 14 - Reasons to not attend antenatal classes before giving birth (%)²⁹



On the other hand, 68% (34) of Roma women had already heard of postnatal depression, and the majority knew someone who had experienced it (58.8%, or 20 women).

²⁹ Multiple answers.

When asked about their own situation, nine of the 20 women (45%) said that they have suffered from it, and six of them looked for help. The main reason for not seeking help was that these women did not know what was wrong with them.

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woman and they like to be mother early. Also, the strong pressure from the families for early motherhood and fact that is needed to preserve the role of women.

However, for those who consider that something can be done in favour of preventing and reducing early marriages and pregnancies, many suggestions and opinions were made. It is quite clear the role of community and families. Below are presented some of those opinions.

On the one hand, the need for girls and boys to wait and realise that there is a time for everything:

'Families should talk to young people, in order to alert them and make them realise that there is time for everything and that they can only gain if each event takes its own time.' Roma woman, 29 years

In their discourse, these women recognise the value of childhood, which, in their opinion, should be taken into account by the families themselves, while marriage is seen as a responsibility that has no place in the time of life in which play should take place.

'Trying to explain that being a child is once in a lifetime. Marriage isn't a joke and there are responsibilities.' Roma woman, 36 years

'Take precautions, get to know each other, first give it time and later be parents.' Roma woman, 37 years

Other opinions emphasise the role that older women can play through their experiences and their life wisdom:

'Hold sessions with young girls and boys to prevent early marriages.' Roma woman, 25 years

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'Roma woman with an example of life, to talk to teenage girls.' Roma woman, 24 years

'Meet and talk with someone important and respected from the community.' Roma woman, 28 years

'Talking to older people, making them realise that there is time for everything and there is no point in rushing.' Roma woman, 50 years

'Through Roma women, the word is passed on.' Roma woman, 38 years

'Through a respected woman from the community.' Roma woman, 46 years

However, one voice stands out for its forceful opinion on the role of legislation and punishment in the face of non-compliance:

'It would have to be punished somehow to stop it happening. Children shouldn't get married; they should play and study.' Roma woman, 27 years

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