

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



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



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Policy Recommendations Work Package 3 Activity 3.4 Ireland

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1. Executive Summary

This report examines early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities in Ireland, within the wider social, economic, and structural context. The findings highlight that early marriage and early motherhood persist among some Roma communities and are closely linked to factors such as poverty, social exclusion, gender inequality, limited access to education, and barriers to services.

The research shows that early marriage often leads to early motherhood, with significant implications for Roma women’s and girls’ health, educational attainment, autonomy, and long-term life opportunities. Participants described the challenges associated with becoming mothers at a young age, including disrupted education, early assumption of adult responsibilities, and economic dependency. Experiences of discrimination and exclusion along with difficulties accessing appropriate healthcare and support services were also identified as compounding these challenges.

Importantly, the report highlights the perspectives of Roma women with lived experience. Their contributions provide insight into the underlying factors of early marriage and early motherhood and the possibilities for change. Many participants expressed a desire for greater access to education, information, and support, alongside more respectful and culturally sensitive engagement from institutions. Overall, the findings underline the importance of rights-based, inclusive, and community-led approaches that centre Roma women’s voices and address the structural inequalities that contribute to early marriage and early motherhood.

2. Introduction

Early marriage and early motherhood are recognised internationally as practices that can have significant implications for the rights, health, and life opportunities of women and girls. In Ireland, these issues require careful examination within the context of Roma communities, whose experiences are shaped by a long history of marginalisation, discrimination, and social exclusion. While Roma communities in Ireland are diverse, some shared structural challenges such as poverty, barriers to education, insecure living conditions and limited access to services can create conditions in which early marriage and early motherhood may occur.

This report forms part of the Roma Influencers Network project and aims to contribute to an understanding of early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities in Ireland.

It adopts a rights-based and participatory approach, centring the voices and experiences of Roma women.

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3. Legal and Policy Framework in Ireland

In Ireland, early marriage is prohibited by law, with the minimum legal age for marriage set at 18 without exception. Early marriage and early motherhood are addressed within wider legal and policy frameworks relating to child protection, education, health, and gender equality. While these frameworks provide important protections, the report highlights that barriers such as discrimination, limited access to services, and lack of trust in institutions can affect how effectively they work in practice, particularly for Roma women and girls.

Policy Recommendations - Ireland

Education

- Use policy measures and statutory guidance to ensure girls and young mothers can remain in or return to education through flexible pathways, practical supports, and childcare options.

Health and Social services

- Support service delivery approaches that build trust with Roma communities, including community-based outreach, peer-based support, and engagement through trusted Roma individuals and organisations.
- Ensure access to culturally sensitive information on sexual and reproductive health, including prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, ideally delivered by trained Roma peer educators.

Community Development

- Support community-led discussions within Roma communities on early marriage and early motherhood, including education, health, and rights. Facilitating dialogue through trusted Roma individuals and organisations can help build awareness, shared understanding, and informed decision-making.
- Implement targeted empowerment programmes for Roma girls, focusing on building self-confidence and informed decision-making. Programmes should be designed and delivered by Roma peer support workers, with support from relevant public services and NGOs.

Note: Initiatives such as the Roma Influencers Network project could provide a valuable model for developing culturally appropriate, community-based interventions.

Policy



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- Ensure Roma women with lived experience are meaningfully involved in the development, implementation, and review of policies and services affecting them.
- Address the wider social determinants of early marriage and early motherhood by recognising that early marriage is often linked to broader structural inequities, including poverty, low educational attainment, discrimination, and limited access to services. Funding should also be provided to integrated, multi-sectoral initiatives that address these intersecting factors. Interventions should be informed and supported by Roma peer support workers to ensure they are culturally appropriate and effective.

Note: Initiatives such as the DROM project implemented by Cairde could provide a valuable model for integrated, community-based and multi-sectoral approaches.

Data collection

- Strengthen ethical, non-stigmatising data collection across sectors to better understand needs and inform effective responses.



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