



Good Practices for the Prevention of Early Marriage and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities – The Portuguese Experience

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1. Introduction

Early marriage and early motherhood are complex phenomena influenced by multiple social, economic, cultural and institutional factors. International evidence demonstrates that their prevention does not depend solely on legislative reforms or on interventions specifically targeting these phenomena. Rather, it requires integrated approaches that promote the effective exercise of the rights of children and young people, gender equality, school retention, access to healthcare, community participation and the reduction of social inequalities.

Against this background, the project *Roma Influencers: Breaking the Circle of Early Marriage and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities* sought to identify practices that contribute to creating favourable conditions for delaying marriage and motherhood, particularly among Roma girls. The selection of practices was based on the methodological criteria established by the project, giving priority to initiatives that demonstrate relevance, community participation, cultural sensitivity, sustainability, transferability and the capacity to promote gender equality and social inclusion.

It is important to emphasise that not all the practices identified were specifically designed to prevent early marriage or early motherhood. On the contrary, many address their structural determinants by promoting protective factors that are widely recognised in the international literature.

This report organises the practices identified according to these protective factors, highlighting the complementarity between different levels of intervention: community, institutional and policy.

2. Methodology

The good practices presented in this report were identified through documentary research, a review of the scientific literature, and an analysis of information published by public authorities, civil society organisations and international institutions.

The sources consulted included publications by the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), the Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF), the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Girls Not Brides.

Each practice was analysed according to the methodological criteria established by the Roma Influencers project, namely:

- Relevance
- Effectiveness
- Community participation
- Cultural sensitivity and non-discrimination
- Gender equality
- Sustainability
- Transferability
- Networking
- Innovation

3. Good Practices Identified

3.1 Education as the Main Protective Factor

Research consistently demonstrates that girls' continued participation in education is the strongest protective factor against early marriage and early motherhood. The two practices presented below illustrate complementary approaches to promoting educational inclusion and equal opportunities for Roma young people.

ROMA Educa Programme

Lead organisation: Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), formerly the High Commission for Migration (ACM).

The *ROMA Educa* Programme was launched in 2019 by the former High Commission for Migration (ACM), through the Escolhas Programme, as part of the implementation of the National Roma Communities Integration Strategy (ENICC). Initially aimed at secondary school students, the programme was subsequently extended to include pupils attending lower secondary education (third cycle of basic education), thereby strengthening its capacity to intervene at an earlier stage of educational pathways.

The programme provides scholarships designed to support the attendance and retention of Roma students within the education system, reducing the financial barriers that contribute to early school leaving and encouraging the continuation of education. In addition to financial assistance, the programme offers personalised support through local managing organisations and community mediators, promoting cooperation between students, families and schools while recognising educational success as a key driver of social inclusion and personal development.

Since its establishment, the programme has expanded significantly. The first edition supported approximately 50 students, whereas the most recent editions have made 210 scholarships available annually, demonstrating the consolidation of *ROMA Educa* as a national measure promoting equal opportunities and tackling early school leaving among Roma students.

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in promoting education as a strategy for empowerment, recognising that remaining in education and progressing through educational pathways are fundamental to expanding the opportunities available to Roma young people for social, professional and civic participation. The programme combines financial support, personalised follow-up and mediation with families and schools, creating favourable conditions for educational success.

ROMA Educa represents a good practice because it addresses one of the principal protective factors identified by international research: keeping girls and boys in education. By reducing the risk of early school leaving and strengthening educational aspirations, the programme broadens the life opportunities available to Roma young people and creates conditions that encourage the postponement of early marriage and early motherhood, promoting informed choices and greater equality of opportunity.

OPRE – Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education

Lead organisation: Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), in partnership with Associação Letras Nómadas.

The *Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education (OPRE)* was established in 2016 as a pilot initiative promoted by civil society organisations. It subsequently evolved into a public policy measure implemented by AIMA in partnership with Associação Letras Nómadas. The programme aims to promote access to, retention in and successful completion of higher education among Roma students, thereby reducing educational inequalities and increasing the representation of Roma communities within higher education.

OPRE combines scholarships with a personalised support model that includes mentoring, academic guidance and personal and professional development activities. This approach seeks not only to address the financial barriers that may jeopardise the continuation of studies but also to respond to the social, institutional and cultural challenges that many Roma students encounter when accessing and progressing through higher education.

Throughout its successive editions, the programme has awarded around 30 scholarships each year on average, making it one of Portugal's principal national measures for promoting equal opportunities in access to higher education for Roma students. Its continuity over ten editions demonstrates both its institutional consolidation and the recognition of higher education as a key instrument for social inclusion and intergenerational mobility.

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in combining financial support with mentoring and the promotion of positive role models. In addition to facilitating access to higher education, *OPRE* encourages the development of support networks among students, strengthens personal and academic skills and contributes to the emergence of a new generation of Roma professionals in fields

such as Law, Social Work, Education, Health and the Social Sciences. In doing so, it also strengthens leadership and civic participation within Roma communities.

OPRE represents a good practice because it addresses one of the principal structural determinants of early marriage and early motherhood: the continuity of educational pathways. By promoting access to and success in higher education, the programme expands opportunities for education, employment and economic independence, enabling Roma young people to pursue more diverse life trajectories and to make free and informed choices regarding education, marriage and family life. Beyond its impact on individual participants, *OPRE* has become an important instrument for social transformation, demonstrating that sustained investment in education is one of the most effective strategies for tackling persistent inequalities and promoting the full inclusion of Roma communities.

3.2 Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health

Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF) – Community-Based Intervention to Promote Health, Equality and the Inclusion of Roma Communities

Lead organisation: Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF), in partnership with the Municipality of Matosinhos, the Local Health Unit, school clusters and a range of local organisations.

For several years, the *Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF)* has implemented a community-based outreach intervention with Roma communities living in the municipality of Matosinhos. The intervention is founded on long-term relationships of trust and on close cooperation with public services and local organisations. Among its most significant initiatives is the Matosinhos 100 Preconceito project, which seeks to promote the social inclusion of Roma people through an integrated approach combining health education, the promotion of gender equality, action against discrimination, the recognition of Roma culture and the strengthening of community participation.

APF's intervention includes a wide range of health promotion activities, with particular emphasis on sexual and reproductive health, family planning, maternal and child health, and health literacy, while simultaneously facilitating Roma communities' access to healthcare services. The organisation also addresses issues relating to education, training, employability, the prevention of gender-based violence, and the fight against stereotypes and discrimination, recognising that these areas are fundamental to social inclusion and to enabling people to develop independent life pathways. Gender equality is embedded across all

activities, with the empowerment of Roma women regarded as a key factor in accelerating social change and preventing situations of vulnerability.

In addition to its local intervention, *APF* has participated in several European initiatives focusing on sexual and reproductive rights and the prevention of harmful traditional practices. Of particular relevance is its participation in the *EU Roadmap on Forced and Early Marriage for Frontline Professionals* project, which developed a European roadmap to support professionals working in healthcare, education, child protection and justice in identifying, referring and supporting victims of forced and/or early marriage. This contribution enabled Portuguese experience to become part of a wider European process of knowledge generation and the development of guidance for multi-sectoral intervention.

The principal innovative feature of this practice lies in its combination of community-based outreach, sexual and reproductive health promotion, mediation with public services and multi-agency cooperation. Rather than limiting its work to providing information or referring people to services, the intervention seeks to build lasting relationships of trust with Roma communities and to promote coordinated responses involving healthcare, education, social services and local government. At the same time, *APF's* participation in European projects facilitates the exchange of knowledge between countries and strengthens the technical quality of the interventions implemented in Portugal.

This initiative represents a good practice because it addresses several of the structural determinants associated with early marriage and early motherhood. By promoting health literacy, facilitating access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, strengthening gender equality, tackling discrimination and enhancing the autonomy of Roma women, it creates favourable conditions for children, young people and families to exercise their rights and make free and informed choices. At the same time, it demonstrates that sustained community-based interventions, developed in close collaboration with Roma communities and public services, are more likely to achieve lasting change than isolated awareness-raising initiatives.

3.3 Women's Leadership and Empowerment

Roma Women's Associations: Leadership, Participation and Social Transformation

Lead organisations: Association for the Development of Portuguese Roma Women (AMUCIP), Ribaltambição – Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities, and other community-based organisations.

Over the past two decades, Portugal has witnessed the progressive strengthening of the Roma associative movement, particularly organisations led by women. These organisations have assumed an increasingly important role in promoting gender equality, education, civic participation, intercultural mediation and human rights, while enabling Roma communities themselves to play an active role in shaping responses to the challenges they face.

Founded in 2000, *AMUCIP* was the first Portuguese organisation established specifically to promote the development of Roma women. Throughout its work, it has implemented projects in the fields of education, women's empowerment, support for children, intercultural mediation, action against discrimination and the promotion of Roma culture, establishing itself as a national reference point for encouraging the participation of Roma women and fostering dialogue with public institutions.

More recently, *Ribaltambição – Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities* has developed a wide range of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, challenging stereotypes and strengthening the participation of Roma women. Among these is the project "*Roma Voices: The Reality of Marriage in Our Communities*", which resulted in the production of a documentary designed to challenge myths and misconceptions surrounding marriage within Roma communities through testimonies from Roma couples, community leaders, academics and activists. The documentary promotes a more diverse and balanced understanding of Roma communities, highlights the variety of life experiences within those communities and reinforces the role of women as agents of change, challenging the oversimplified representations that frequently appear in public discourse.

In addition to these initiatives, Roma organisations have increasingly participated in public consultation processes, European projects, awareness-raising campaigns, training activities and national and international forums. In doing so, they have strengthened their capacity to influence public policy while helping to bring institutions closer to Roma communities. This development represents a significant shift: Roma communities are no longer viewed merely as recipients of

public policies but are increasingly recognised as active partners in their design, implementation and evaluation.

The principal innovative feature of this practice lies in strengthening the leadership of Roma women as protagonists of social change. The organisations develop interventions designed and delivered by members of Roma communities themselves, promoting culturally appropriate solutions, reinforcing trust between communities and institutions, and creating positive role models for children and young people. At the same time, the production of audiovisual materials, public campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives helps to challenge persistent stereotypes while giving greater visibility to the voices and experiences of Roma women.

Strengthening Roma women's organisations represents a good practice because it simultaneously promotes civic participation, gender equality and community empowerment. By enhancing Roma women's capacity to assume leadership roles, influence public policy and act as positive role models within their communities, these organisations contribute to transforming discriminatory social norms, expanding educational and professional opportunities for Roma girls and creating favourable conditions for preventing early marriage and early motherhood. The Portuguese experience therefore demonstrates that investing in the Roma associative movement is an essential factor in developing public policies that are more participatory, sustainable and effective.

4. Concluding Synthesis: A Portuguese Model of Prevention Based on Rights, Participation and Inclusion

The analysis of the practices identified demonstrates that Portugal has developed a coherent and diverse set of initiatives which, although implemented in different contexts and promoted by different organisations, converge towards a common objective: creating the conditions for Roma children, young people and women to exercise their rights fully and to develop life projects that are free, autonomous and based on informed choices.

One of the report's main conclusions is that the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood does not depend on the existence of programmes specifically designed to address these phenomena. Rather, the Portuguese experience demonstrates that effective responses can be achieved by tackling their structural determinants, including educational retention, access to healthcare, gender equality, intercultural mediation, community participation and the strengthening of Roma organisations.

Within this context, education plays a particularly important role. Programmes such as *ROMA Educa* and *OPRE* demonstrate that sustained investment in the education of Roma children and young people is one of the most effective mechanisms for expanding educational, professional and social opportunities, strengthening individual autonomy and supporting the development of life trajectories that break the cycle of social exclusion.

The promotion of sexual and reproductive health and the strengthening of links between Roma communities and public services represent a second key dimension of the Portuguese experience. The interventions implemented by the *Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF)*, together with experiences of intercultural mediation in healthcare settings, demonstrate that community-based, culturally competent responses developed in partnership with Roma communities facilitate access to rights, reduce inequalities and create the conditions for more informed and autonomous decisions regarding sexuality, marriage and parenthood.

The report also highlights the growing importance of the Roma associative movement, particularly organisations led by Roma women. Organisations such as *AMUCIP*, *Ribaltambição* and, more recently, *RIZOMA* demonstrate that strengthening women's leadership is fundamental to transforming social norms, challenging stereotypes and promoting the active participation of Roma

communities in the design and implementation of the public policies that affect them. This development is fully consistent with the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation, which identifies empowerment, participation and the fight against antigypsyism as essential dimensions for achieving genuine equality.

Despite the progress achieved, the report also identifies a number of challenges for the future. There remains a need to strengthen monitoring and impact evaluation systems, develop indicators capable of tracking trends in early marriage and early motherhood, and reinforce coordination between the education, health and social protection sectors, local authorities and civil society organisations. Further investment in knowledge generation and participatory research is likewise essential to support more effective public policies that are better adapted to the diversity of Roma communities.

In conclusion, the Portuguese experience demonstrates that preventing early marriage and early motherhood requires an integrated approach grounded in human rights, gender equality and the active participation of Roma communities. Rather than responding to a single social problem, the good practices analysed seek to create the conditions for all Roma children and young people to have access to quality education, culturally competent healthcare, opportunities for meaningful participation and supportive environments that enable them to exercise their rights fully and shape their own futures. It is precisely this integrated vision that represents the Portuguese experience's principal contribution to the implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation and to the development of future public policies in this field