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Virginity, Early Marriage and Well-being of Roma Girls –

The Children´s Rights Perspective

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Abstract

Roma people originally migrated from India and by the 21st century they inhabited most of EU and neighboring countries (largely in Central and Eastern Europe) numbering up to 12 million in total. Deeply rooted in Roma tradition are customs revolving around early marriage and bride´s virginity which have a significant impact on well-being of Roma children, especially girls, even today.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines measures that need to be undertaken in order to ensure healthy growth and well-being of children. The implementation of the CRC differs across countries and its universalistic approach often collides with specific cultural definitions of childhood and well-being.

 Previous research[[1]](#footnote-2) has shown a significant presence of gender asymmetry in Roma communities which is maintained through traditional marital practices. This research focuses on early marriage customs and commoditization of virginity in Roma society from the CRC perspective. Attitudes of Roma youth (girls and boys) towards the mentioned topics were assessed in winter 2009/10 through semi-structured interviews in Germany, Serbia and Bosnia.

Qualitative data analysis showed that the participants share attitudes that are in line with the tradition, regardless of the country. Still, significant gender differences emerged. Roma girls often have to disrupt their institutional education as they reach puberty, because their parents consider schools as unsafe. Roma girls have to take on a subordinated role (being hardworking, polite and obedient) if they want to be accepted by their families. In contrast, Roma boys are encouraged to develop independent behavior, enjoying more autonomy and freedom. A detrimental impact on the well-being of Roma girls is exacerbated by the generally negative public perception and rejection of Roma by host-societies, followed by social exclusion and discrimination.

A number of CRC rights, with the emphasis on the best interest of the child, are being compromised by traditional customs which considerably affects the well-being of Roma girls.

1. Regional project, “A virgin or not?” (2006) conducted in Montenegro, Serbia, Hungary, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia supported by the Institute for Open Society in New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)