

ROMA WOMEN IN MIGRATION: PERCEPTIONS, PARTICIPATION AND EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES



University of Manchester

September 2016

The research leading to these results comes from MIGROM, "Dealing with diversity and cohesion: the case of the Roma in the European Union", a project funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme (GA319901).

Project title: **The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects, and future engagement strategies.**



Roma women in migration: Perceptions, participation and emerging opportunities

Following the adoption of the EU Strategy on Roma Inclusion in March 2011¹, the promotion of Roma women's participation and of equal opportunities and has become a key issue in policies targeting the Roma population. The Strategy's main objective is to ensure

gender equality mainstreaming by addressing the specific needs of Roma women while involving them in the development of policies; stopping the practice of child marriages (4.c)

This objective was later echoed in the European Council's *Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states* (Brussels, 9 and 10 December 2013)², which recommends that member states must

Combat all forms of discrimination, including multiple discrimination, faced by Roma children and women, and fight violence, including domestic violence, against women and girls, trafficking in human beings, underage and forced marriages, and begging involving children (2.5)

In both cases, the promotion of gender equality and the fight against gendered discrimination is linked to the tackling of practices such as early marriage, trafficking and begging with children. The idea that such practices are part of Roma culture clearly transpires in media reports³ which often present Roma parents as prone to neglect their children and even abuse them, and Roma culture in general as exploitative of women and young people. The risks of this connection have been highlighted in the April 2015 CAHROM Thematic Report on *Child/early and forced marriages within Roma communities in the context of the promotion of gender equality* [CAHROM(2015)8]⁴. Building upon an earlier position paper by The European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) and the Romani Women Informal Platform Phenjalipe⁵, CAHROM warns against the risk of stigmatizing the Roma community at large by attributing early marriages (and the other practices signalled out by the European Council) to Romani culture. Both documents clarify how such practices are not exclusive to the Roma and how they regularly emerge in contexts of educational and economic deprivation. Furthermore the ERTF/Phenjalipe report notes

¹P7_TA(2011)0092: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P7-TA-2011-0092+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>

²http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139979.pdf.

³See for example the 2014 Channel4 documentary 'The Gypsy Matchmaker' (http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13178141.TV_review_Gypsy_Matchmaker_pretends_child_abuse_has_a_romantic_side/), the 2013 treatment of cases of fair-skinned children removal from Roma families in Greece and Ireland <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2474417/Maria-groomed-child-bride-Roma-Gypsy-couple.html>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24635560> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/24/blonde-girl-roma-parents-returned-dna> or the portrayal of certain fairs attended by Roma in Eastern Europe <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2299288/Fun-flirtation-bridal-market-young-Roma-women-meet-future-husbands--price-right.html>

⁴<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680651475>

⁵Making early marriage in Roma communities a global concern (September 2014). https://www.ertf.org/images/Reports/Making_Early_Marriage_in_Roma_Community_a_global_concern_Final_Version_.pdf

how the attribution of these practices to Roma culture leads to two apparently opposite consequences. At times such practices are glossed over, as shown for example by the Italian courts condoning of begging with children as a ‘Roma cultural practice’ (Ruggiu 2016). In other situations authorities intervene even on the basis of weak evidence often removing Roma children from the care of their families, as illustrated by the over-representation of migrant Roma children put up for adoption in Catalonia, Spain⁶ and in Italy (Saletti Salza 2010). In both cases, however, the ERTF/Phenjalipe report concludes that the result is the perpetuation of the stigma attached to Roma communities, which in turn makes the achievement of gender equality for Roma women even more difficult.

Research carried out by the MigRom consortium indeed highlighted how the perception of Roma family structures, particularly the shared care of children by members of the extend family, is often perceived by authorities against the background of suspicions of child trafficking⁷. At the same time, while we observed that Roma women are the main drivers in a change towards having less children and increasing the spacing between pregnancies⁸, health and social care professionals often retain the image of Roma women as unable or unwilling to take control over their reproductive practices. This has direct implications for Roma women participation since, as argued by Pantea (2012), they have to negotiate “community-specific obligations to share and the more individualistic need to fulfil their potential” (1264). The situation of Roma women is thus the product of the interaction between gender relations within Roma families and the opportunities that women have outside the family, which are, in turn, shaped by the support offered both by governmental and non-governmental actors. However, because of the negative perception of Roma family structures, interventions to support Roma women might be tailored to stereotypical images rather than the actual situation and reduce, rather than increase, the opportunities for participation.

As the 2016 Council of Europe Thematic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion⁹ calls for innovative models for inclusive policies for the most vulnerable (Priority 2) it seemed timely to address the role that Roma family structures and, most importantly, the way in which they are perceived have in any attempt at supporting Roma women’s participation. The annual meeting of the MigRom consortium held in Granada on 30 and 31 March 2016 offered precisely this opportunity and the plenary discussion was devoted to this topic.

The plenary discussion took the form of a panel in which MigRom researchers

⁶ROMEST – Xarxa per L’observatori de la població gitana procedent de l’est d’Europa a Catalunya: Barreres a la inclusió social (April 2014). <http://www.romest.cat/wp-content/uploads/Q2.-Barreres-a-la-inclusi%C3%B3-social.pdf>.

⁷MigRom University of Manchester Extended Survey, pages 25-32. http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Mcr.pdf

⁸ MigRom, Pilot survey of birth rates and age at first birth among Romanian Roma in Manchester. http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/MigRom_BirthRatesAug2014.pdf and MigRom, University of Granada Extended Survey, pages 66-99. http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Granada.pdf

⁹ SG/Inf(2015)38: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680684b5e>.

Professor Yaron Matras (University of Manchester), Professor Leonardo Piasere (University of Verona) and Professor Juan Gamella (University of Granada) presented the evidence emerging from comparative research conducted in the UK, Italy and Spain among Roma migrant communities. The panel was completed by Livia Otal (Médecins du Monde project coordinator for the Paris area), which brought into the discussion the perspective of NGOs involved in the delivery of interventions aimed at the Roma. Finally, during the open discussion, Amanda Flety (Policy Officer at Plaine Commune Grand Paris) contributed the perspective of local authorities. Further insights from research were provided by MigRom researchers Dr Stefania Pontrandolfo (University of Verona) and Professor Henriette Asseó (Fondation Maison de Sciences de l'Homme, Paris).

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MigRom Consortium meeting: Plenary discussion

31 March 2016, Granada

Panellists:

Professor Yaron Matras (chairing), University of Manchester

Professor Leonardo Piasere, University of Verona

Professor Juan Gamella, University of Granada

Livia Otal, Médecins du Monde

Professor Yaron Matras, University of Manchester:

The Council of Europe recently published its Thematic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion¹⁰. In its communication to announce this Plan, the Council of Europe flagged a need to raise awareness of and curb “early or forced marriages, domestic violence, trafficking and forced begging in Roma communities by addressing negative consequences of such activities”, for which 20 million Euros were pledged over the next four years. A quote from the Secretary General of the Council of Europe indicated that special attention would be paid to women and children as “vulnerable” members of the Roma community. Almost 100 members of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies signed an open letter to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, expressing concern that the communication contributes to further stigmatisation of Roma communities. In response, the Council of Europe removed the communication from its website, stating that it misrepresented its position. However, a narrative has built up over time around these issues in Council of Europe deliberations relating to Roma.

Ensuing debate raised the following questions, which panellists will address in turn:

- Is there a family structure in Romani communities that is distinct vis-à-vis neighbouring communities (i.e. majority population in countries of origin, local population in countries to which Roma migrate, or other migrants)?
- If there is a distinct structure, does it lend any plausibility to the assumption that there is greater vulnerability of members of the Roma community in regard to marriage, age of marriage, voluntary participation in marriage, or the particular vulnerability of women and children in relation to protection against abuse and violence?
- To what extent is perception of family structure an issue for authorities in their dealings with Roma, in your experience?
- What value would you attribute to the following arguments, which have put forward by various parties in debate arising from the Council of Europe’s communication around its Thematic Action Plan?

¹⁰SG/Inf(2015)38

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680684b5e>.

- *We should be careful to single out Roma around early marriage, begging, domestic violence and trafficking, because these are universal issues and not attributed to Roma culture. Singling out Roma on these issues may reinforce prejudice.*
- *We should draw attention to these issues in regard to Roma communities as there may be practices of early and arranged marriages, organised begging, and a vulnerability to or tendency to gloss over domestic violence, that are confined to Roma communities in the European context.*
- *We should draw particular attention to these issues in regard to Roma communities, not because they are confined to Roma communities but because, in some countries, authorities are reluctant to intervene and protect Roma where they would protect other communities, citing an 'internal law' that they do not want to intervene in, or simply through lack of care.*

In Manchester, as local authorities scaled back their Roma Strategy, intervention was still being led by a voluntary sector organisation, in partnership with some Manchester City Council officers and using MCC funding, which drew attention to alleged vulnerability of Roma girls and discussed disengagement from school and discontinuation of secondary school education by girls in the Roma community due to a “disproportionate” number of early marriage and teenage pregnancies¹¹. Data on marriage, birth rates¹² and school attendance¹³ gathered by the University of Manchester team proved that these generalisations were unfounded. In a report in June 2015, the City Council accepted that it had received unsubstantiated information and flagged the need to substantiate and verify information in further reports¹⁴. In the Manchester context, lessons have been learned from this experience on the need for accuracy and clarity when the City Council collates information on communities, in particular the Roma, and regarding generalisation around safeguarding and early marriage.

Professor Leonardo Piasere, University of Verona:

There is a huge amount of variation in family structure among not only Roma families but families across Europe. In Europe, the typical middle class urban family is the

¹¹MigRom, University of Manchester Extended Survey, pages 32-38.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Mcr.pdf

¹²MigRom, Pilot survey of birth rates and age at first birth among Romanian Roma in Manchester.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/MigRom_BirthRatesAug2014.pdf

¹³MigRom, University of Manchester Extended Survey, pages 56-61.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Mcr.pdf

¹⁴Manchester City Council, Community Scrutiny Committee 24/06/2015

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/5_Roma_engagement_report.pdf

exception, not the norm. There is a more frequent model among Roma of the extended family, and family connections are generally seen as more important than social contacts. Generally, Roma may have more confidence and trust in family structures than relations with administrative authorities.

There is a tendency towards endogamous practices – marriage within rather than outside of the community – but this is not unique to Roma communities and can be seen in other ethnic minority and rural communities. It is impossible to generalise on the age of marriage; the age of marriage among the Roma and Sinti known to the Verona team, for example, may be lower (at around 20 years old) than the Italian average,¹⁵ but the average Italian age of marriage is relatively high at 31.

Regarding effect on school attendance, based on my personal observation, in many Italian Roma and Sinti communities (not recent immigrants) girls often continue further in education than boys. Where there is underage marriage, we cannot generalise but this might have an effect on education. Domestic violence is a global problem and we cannot attribute it only to Roma communities. In Italy, around 130 women were murdered in 2015 by husbands or partners.¹⁶

Livia Otal, Médecins du Monde:

Livia draws on eight years of field experience of working in slums in Paris. The work of Médecins du Monde focuses on individual health, and they are aware that particular cases (of high numbers of abortions and pregnancies in individuals, for example) do not make statistics, and it is impossible to generalise. However, for the NGO to fulfil its mission of improving individual and personal health, it is sometimes necessary to realise the occurrence of these cases and to raise questions around observations made in the field.

Livia has worked with 3000 people from 10 different Romanian Roma groups over 8 years, many of whom face forced evictions. Many of these people show pendular migration patterns. Her impression is that according to village of origin, there are differences in education, activities, clothing, family organisation, health, housing, slum architecture, relation with other Roma communities, migration experience, and more¹⁷. Livia has been able to observe the impact of political policies and NGO activities, which may have influenced family organisation and practices and she has some insight into how practices change due to migration to France and other countries. Specific migration destination is also relevant; there appears to be a specific

¹⁵Verona, University of Verona Extended Survey, pages 17-21.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Report-on-the-Extended-Survey_University-of-Verona.pdf

¹⁶http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/11/25/news/violenza_sulle_donne_femminicidi_in_italia_e_n_el_mondo-128131159/

¹⁷For an example about one particular slum see MigRom, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Extended Survey, pages 12-19. http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Paris.pdf

situation that emerges in Paris, in contrast to the experiences of colleagues in Marseille, Strasbourg and Nantes, for example, who work with families that, by and large, learn French, gain employment, and live relatively autonomously.

NGOs and institutions have created and observed changes over time, including initial reluctance among some groups to talk about maternal and sexual health followed by a willingness to engage in this discussion, for example.

Livia notes that the long-term policy of forced evictions creates a climate of instability, which also changes the character of traditional Roma organisation and reduces capacity for integration through its impact on rights, health, education, engagement with and confidence in administrative structures and perspective on future prospects. The side effects of political measures can be easily understood throughout history, but it is important to also understand that current policies are forging and creating changes in communities¹⁸.

Professor Juan Gamella, University of Granada:

Family is an ambiguous concept, and can mean network, household and domestic unit. One area of distinction among Roma communities is in reproduction, as an area of relative agency. Roma are subject to many forces outside of their control, including in reproduction. Child mortality, for example, influences reproductive practices and Roma women tend to have fewer children when infant mortality rates are lower.

Family structure and systems differ according to the group in question, as highlighted in the differences in data from the Cluj team¹⁹ and the Granada team²⁰. Practices are adapted and changed by diaspora experience. There are generally different gender and marriage systems among the Roma that the Granada team work with, which are not only traditional or conservative but also often innovative. That being said, marriage systems tend to be endogamous, homogenous and virilocal, and are coordinated by the parents. These systems arguably provide safety and can help fight structural exclusion. However, the networks with protective capacities are based on the sacrifice and movement of women (through relocating to live with their in-laws). More opportunities for Roma in school, employment and benefits will cause some natural changes to these systems.

There is somewhat of an ‘obsession’ with family structure on the part of local authorities in their dealings with Roma. This is propagated also in the media; when the age of consent was raised in Spain, for example, journalists interviewed Gitanos

¹⁸MigRom, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme Extended Survey, pages 33-57.
http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Paris.pdf

¹⁹MigRom, Institute for Research on National Minorities Extended Survey, pages 40-47.
http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Cluj.pdf

²⁰MigRom, University of Granada Extended Survey, pages 66-99.
http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Yr2report_Granada.pdf

and Romanians (as a ‘metaphor’ for Gitanos) in their reports²¹. Such reporting sends the message that, in Europe, early marriage concerns Gypsies.

In family planning and primary healthcare, there is continuous tension between Roma women and healthcare practitioners, some of whom have experienced occasional ‘extreme’ cases – of a high numbers of pregnancies and of abortions in individual Roma patients, for example – and discriminate against other Roma women in this respect.²² Heavily biased media reports of children being ‘sold’ stress that this is a traditional practice, that arranged marriages are necessarily forced marriages, that payments being made frames the issue as human trafficking and that action should be taken. These reports and the ‘obsession’ with family structure take an element of reality, and exaggerate it. Cultural difference is very easily manipulated and the reports touch upon the essential taboo of western societies, the protection of children.

Dr Stefania Pontrandolfo, University of Verona:

Practices can change without targeted, public intervention. Mortality rates are high for Oltenian Roma, and so are mortality rates for non-Roma living in the same region. However, the key difference is that this high rate can be attributed to an ageing population for the non-Roma, but is due to high infant mortality rates for the Roma. This is due to high birth rates coupled with insufficient healthcare in rural areas.²³ There is evidence that practices change when Roma women migrate; in a sample of Roma who migrated to Bari and Milan, for example, women have reported that they know how to use contraception without the need for intervention from authorities or practitioners²⁴. Oltenian Roma women often cited insufficient healthcare as a major push factor for migration; authorities should focus on supporting improvements to health services in Romania, rather than intervening in personal, private choices of people regarding their reproduction in the destination country.

Professor Leonardo Piasere:

The notion of a ‘traditional Roma family’ should be dismissed. Instead, we should ask why do people feel the need to have large families? If the average in Italy is to have one child per family, at the age of 33, why do Roma families have more children?

²¹[http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2015-04-29/division-en-la-comunidad-gitana-los-menores-de-16-anos-no-pueden-casarse-en-espana_784529/;](http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2015-04-29/division-en-la-comunidad-gitana-los-menores-de-16-anos-no-pueden-casarse-en-espana_784529/)

http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/07/22/actualidad/1437579678_542369.html

²²<http://www.eldiariomontanes.es/20080222/sociedad/protagonistas/ninas-esposas-20080222.html>;
http://www.abc.es/espana/abci-unos-rumanos-vendieron-hijas-dinero-alcohol-ovejas-y-cerdo-201603200005_noticia.html

²³Preda, M. D. (2010) Demographic Behaviour of the Roma Population – Between Tradition and Modernity. Case-Study: Oltenia Region, Romania. *Human Geographies – Journal of Studies and Researches in Human Geography*. 4(1), 105-119

²⁴MigRom, University of Verona Extended Survey, page 21.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Report-on-the-Extended-Survey_University-of-Verona.pdf

Italian families have a high demand on the international adoption market. Many Roma live in very difficult conditions, so a Roma child has a higher chance of being taken away for adoption and being adopted by non-Roma families.²⁵ Political perception is that Roma have too many children and that their childbirth rates should be reduced.

Professor Juan Gamella:

A high birth rate somewhat changes the national demography, in terms of resources consumed and growth of the population. This is politically inflammatory and is often protested by right-wing groups, in Romania for example.

Professor Yaron Matras:

Policies of sterilisation of Roma women over decades in Czechoslovakia and forced adoption in Scandinavia and Switzerland were only recently brought to light; these centralised policies in eastern and western Europe used government power to specifically control birth rates in a covert, systematic way.

Livia Otal:

Changes over time in migrant communities induce change in Romania, as women share their experiences with family. Authorities create a discourse around these issues being specific to Roma, ignoring determinants such as historical and political factors from the country of origin, as well as different access to healthcare, which all determine to some extent how communities act and change. Authorities sometimes blame Roma communities without considering the impact of long-term factors, such as lack of access to healthcare, and without taking into account how communities will act and react moving forward.

Amanda Flety, Plaine Commune:

Perception of family structure is important in public housing considerations. The typical discourse is based on the assumption that Roma live in extended families so they cannot fit in standard public housing; this discussion is never open. Authorities focus on practices such as family and friends coming to visit Roma in their homes, and conclude that ‘the way they live’ is not compatible with public housing. There is the perception that Roma have a strong family structure; authorities compare Roma with other migrant groups, such as groups from North Africa, who are disparate, and more isolated in their migration, and perceive the family structure of Roma migrants as in opposition to the model in France. Local authorities sometimes perceive that living in slums is a lifestyle choice of Roma families, and that their way of life and their family structure mean that they live there rather than renting on the informal housing market as other migrants often do.

²⁵MigRom, University of Verona Pilot Survey, pages 22-23.

http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Report-on-the-Pilot-Survey_University-of-Verona-.pdf

In France, there is a high level of political debate around Roma and it is important to consider that the discussion is now linked to electoral strategy. In this context, the point of view of local authorities and public policy are changing. In France, Roma migrants are often perceived as linked to Travellers and nomadism, and therefore associated with a way of life that is seen as conflicting to modern French lifestyle. This poses questions on how to construct a relationship between a dominant cultural model and the models of minority communities.

Professor Henriette Asséo, Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme:

In the tension between division of responsibility and power between European institutions and national governments, national governments are taking more of a leading role, away from European institutions, so there emerges a need to find the lowest common denominator among nation states that have different philosophies and approaches. All nation states can unite over the need to prevent early marriage and the supposed protection of children so the issue is picked out as a common denominator in order to work through the European institutions.

There is a tendency for authorities to intervene with family-based socialisation in children of pre-school age, and to take control away from families of this socialisation period. This affects Roma families in a particularly negative way, as they are dependent on the early years of socialisation to transmit culture and identity. There is a campaign to destruct the concept that pre-school socialisation is the property of the family and that affects Roma families in a particularly strong way: since Romani culture is not transmitted through school (mainstream or supplementary), it must remain the property of the family.