

## ***Research approach towards early marriages on European level***

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In my contribution, I offer some ethnographic context to the topic of honor-related abuse. I have conducted 16 months of field research in a Roma community in southern Romania and I have focused on the practice of marriage, whether early or arranged, or not.

One thing I would like to stress from the outset is that the practice of early and/or arranged marriages is a topic of contention among the various Roma groups as much as it is controversial, problematic or exotic for the non-Roma majority population. Many assimilated or less traditional groups like to distinguish themselves from traditional Roma through the fact that they don't practice this form of marriage, and they consider it 'backward'. So we should be careful when ascribing these practices to 'Roma' in general since in reality there is no such thing as 'the Roma'. What we call Roma is a collection of very heterogenous populations that are very keen on distinguishing themselves from one another.

In my intervention I put these practices in a broader context so that we understand what purposes they serve and what moral notions they illustrate. This is essential for understanding why these practices exist and why they go on.

Early marriages tend to occur mostly in so-called traditional communities, which are usually Romani-speakers and defined by strong kinship ties. While they are quite marginalized by the outside world on account of being 'different', these communities pride themselves on being 'true Roma' as opposed to more assimilated groups that have lost their moralities and their 'traditions' and have become more like the non-Roma, whom traditional Roma view as quintessentially immoral. This is to point out that in cases where outsiders see abuse and violence, the people who practice such marriages – including the young girls involved in them – view them as respecting the moral norms of their community. As in all other communities, abiding by the group's moral norms is crucial to gaining membership and status. So in my intervention I discuss early marriages as a cultural practice, not in the sense that it is 'specific to Roma culture' but in the sense that it is embedded in this broader cultural context that I will try to sketch very briefly.

To give an example, there is often talk about Roma 'selling' and 'buying' daughters-in-law, but in the Romani language the practice is simply not described in these terms: Roma use the word 'to pay', *pokinel*, in the context of marriage payments, but never the word 'to buy', *kinel*. This payment does not turn the girl into an object or into property, as it is often wrongly believed. Rather, the Roma conceive of this payment as a manifestation of respect towards the future bride and her family. No self-respecting family would give their daughter away in marriage without such payment, since it would mean, as one of my Roma informants told me in relation to the absence of this practice among non-Roma, that you don't respect the girl or her family and you can just take her for free, like plucking apples from a tree. This payment is a manifestation of commitment.

Secondly, wedding payments are meant to signal the fact that the two families, the wife-givers and the wife-takers, embark on a shared ethical project and that they are able to cooperate. The wife-givers' display of money and wealth (which they make great efforts to produce) signals that they are respectable people, who cherish their son. And lastly, to conclude this ethnographic intermezzo, most girls' parents return this money secretly to the girls' new parents-in-law, to ease her life into her new family, so this 'payment' can be said to have mostly a ritual function.

Adding to this context, I would like to mention several other, broader aspects: one has to do with notions of childhood and adulthood that differ for the Roma from those of the majority populations,

and are closely connected to the concrete living conditions of these group. The second issue is the meanings of gender that prevail in these community, and the third is the relation of these communities with the outside world and with state authorities.

Many Roma communities have a different notion of childhood and teenagerhood than what has become mainstream. Girls of 9 or 10 take over household duties, especially since adults may not be around (due to migration or imprisonment) as a consequence are more mature and independent than non-Roma girls of the same age. Then, we must reckon with the tendency of the lower age of the onset of puberty, which also exists among the general population, possibly as a result of improvements in nutrition. This tendency is compounded in Romani settings where girls must marry as virgins, and the longer their puberty is prolonged, the higher are the chances that they will no longer be virgins.

Then, I propose that marriage is a culmination of the process of socialisation of Roma individuals, a large part of which is the inculcation of values pertaining to proper male and female behaviour. This is something that children observe all around them, in addition to being told that procreation is the greatest accomplishment of an individual, indeed it is what makes one, male or female, a 'proper' Roma. In addition to that, the way your body 'looks', the way you stand and walk and sit, the way you use your eyes (to the ground if you are a woman in public, avoiding women if you are a man) are all bodily expressions of the gendered morality that establishes one as true person.

I also suggest that while marriage has this enormous symbolic baggage, in more practical terms it is also a matter of finding something to do with yourself and your time, meaning of life, especially in situations where parents and siblings might have migrated, employment is absent, and there is much work to be done to earn a living and keep a house.

As for the connections to the outside world, Roma young people have very few substantial connections to people outside their community, to people of higher social status, with different life experiences and conceptions of the outside world. There is no one to help them escape the 'closed life' of their families either by example (providing them with a different role model) or through connections (by offering concrete material help). Thus, while they may be aware that non-Roma do not practice early marriages, they do not necessarily see the good in the absence of this practice, or see how its absence might improve their own lives. Moreover, local authorities are reluctant to intervene and prefer to leave Roma communities live in enclaves and only deal with 'leaders;' often at the more mediatized early marriages of the children of prominent leaders, important local authorities could be seen at the celebration. In a well-known case where the daughter of a Roma 'king' in Romania was married off at 14, the wedding ceremony was performed in the city's Orthodox Cathedral with full episcopal backing, and the wedding sponsor was a former minister of the Interior. And another issue I would like to raise in connection to this is to ask ourselves whether and how the interventions truly protect the rights and wellbeing of these young people, if saving them often entails cutting their ties with their families, and placing them in foster care. Once again, I emphasize the centrality of the family in an individual's life in the case of a population group that has been systematically excluded from employment, basic citizenship provisions, marginalized or racialized. In reality, people from these backgrounds have no other real choice except to rely on their family and community, which entails a price to pay in terms of membership and belonging. This is the case with many deprived communities, not only ethnic ones.

To conclude, my argument is that any type of intervention to prevent such forms of honor-related violence needs to reckon with the broader cultural and structural context in which these practices occur.

Thank you for your attention.