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Good Practices for the Prevention of Early Marriage and Early Motherhood in Roma Communities

Comparative Transnational Report – WP4



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

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Εθνική Ανάπτυξη Ανθρώπινου
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1. Introduction

Roma communities constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe and continue to face significant inequalities in accessing a wide range of rights. Despite the progress achieved over recent decades, many Roma people remain exposed to poverty, discrimination and antigypsyism, which restrict the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights. Roma women, girls and children are frequently affected by multiple and intersecting forms of inequality arising from the combination of ethnic discrimination, gender inequalities and social exclusion. For this reason, the European Union and the Council of Europe currently identify the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma communities as strategic priorities for the 2020–2030 period, advocating approaches based on human rights, gender equality and the effective participation of Roma communities themselves.

Against this background, early marriage and early motherhood represent particularly complex challenges. Although these phenomena may occur across different social and cultural groups, a range of European studies shows that they continue to affect certain Roma communities in the various countries where they are present, albeit in ways that differ substantially from one context to another.

Across these different contexts, however, early marriage and early motherhood reflect the interaction of multiple factors, including poverty, early school leaving, discrimination, gender inequalities, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, restricted educational and employment opportunities, and the persistence of specific social norms and expectations. Consequently, these phenomena cannot be understood solely as cultural practices, nor can they be addressed exclusively through legislative measures or isolated awareness-raising campaigns. Their prevention requires integrated, sustained and culturally appropriate interventions capable of addressing simultaneously the individual, family, community, institutional and structural factors that shape the life trajectories of Roma girls and women.

It is within this context that the project *Roma Influencers – Breaking the Circle of Early Marriages and Early Motherhood* was developed. Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, the project brings together organisations from Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania. It is based on the recognition that preventing early marriage and early motherhood requires a multidimensional approach founded on knowledge generation, the empowerment of Roma women, community participation, cross-sectoral cooperation and the development of policy recommendations. Throughout its implementation, the project has promoted comparative research, the training of Roma women as *Influencers*, the development of educational resources, community awareness-raising campaigns

and policy dialogue processes, seeking to transform knowledge into practical tools for prevention and social change.

This report is one of the project's main outputs and brings together national practices identified by the project partners—Klimaka (Greece), Cairde (Ireland), CESIS and CooperActiva (Portugal), and Sastipen (Romania)—as well as European and transnational practices considered relevant to the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities. The practices analysed vary considerably in nature, encompassing educational programmes, intercultural mediation, health promotion, peer support, participatory research, collaborative governance, the strengthening of Roma organisations and the development of public policies. This diversity represents one of the report's main strengths, demonstrating that prevention does not depend on a single methodology but rather on the articulation of complementary responses operating at different levels of intervention.

Rather than presenting a catalogue of initiatives, this report seeks to identify the factors that make a practice particularly promising in this field and to explore elements that may be adapted and transferred to other national or local contexts. The comparative analysis shows that the most robust responses combine inclusive education, access to healthcare services, intercultural mediation, community participation, knowledge generation, the leadership of Roma women and participatory governance, in line with the most recent policy directions of the European Union and the Council of Europe for promoting the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma communities.

Within this context, the report pursues five main objectives:

- to identify national, European and transnational practices with the potential to prevent early marriage and early motherhood in Roma communities;
- to analyse the different approaches developed by the four partner countries and identify their distinctive features;
- to highlight success factors, challenges and conditions that facilitate the transfer of these practices to other contexts;
- to identify commonalities and differences across the experiences analysed, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the factors that support prevention;
- to contribute to the development of future public policies and intervention programmes based on scientific evidence, community participation, gender equality and human rights.

2. Methodology and the Limits of the Concept of “Good Practice”

The preparation of this report was guided by the Guidance for the Identification of Good Practices, which, as its title suggests, provided the framework for the research undertaken by each of the project partners. The information presented in this comparative transnational report is based on the national reports and supporting documentation produced by the project partners.

Despite the existence of a common guidance document, the national reports do not follow a completely uniform structure. While some describe specific, time-bound projects, others present institutional approaches, permanent services, methodologies or educational resources.

For this reason, the concept of "good practice" is used with due caution throughout this report. Not all the initiatives reviewed have been subject to outcome or impact evaluations. Accordingly, the report distinguishes between national and transnational practices, as well as between well-established good practices, promising practices and relevant institutional approaches, recognising the available evidence without attributing outcomes that have not yet been demonstrated.

The practices were identified and analysed against the following criteria:

- Relevance
- Effectiveness
- Community Participation
- Cultural Sensitivity and Non-Discrimination
- Gender Approach
- Sustainability
- Transferability
- Networking and Multi-Sectoral Cooperation
- Innovation

3. National and Local Practices

3.1 Greece

The Greek experience demonstrates a strong commitment to participatory knowledge generation, community consultation and influence on public policy.

Roma Child VOICE¹

Lead organisation: Prolepsis Institute, in partnership with the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Their Associates, within the framework of the PREVENT Programme.

The *Roma Child VOICE* initiative is a national project that employs participatory research methodologies to better understand the experiences, needs and perspectives of Roma children. Implemented across several regions of Greece, the project engages Roma children and families, Roma mediators, professionals working in the education, health and social protection sectors, as well as representatives of local and national authorities.

The initiative gathered both qualitative and quantitative evidence on the experiences, needs and attitudes within Roma communities, using the findings to develop evidence-based recommendations for child protection policies. The experience demonstrated that research on socially and culturally sensitive issues requires the active involvement of communities from the earliest stages, collaboration with trusted local partners and the use of culturally appropriate methodologies. Its transferability to other contexts also depends on the ability to translate research findings into concrete intervention proposals and public policy recommendations.

Innovative features

The initiative's principal innovative feature lies in the integration of scientific research with intercultural mediation. The partnership between the Prolepsis Institute and the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Their Associates enables the production of evidence grounded in the active participation of Roma communities, while simultaneously strengthening families' trust in the research process and enhancing the relevance of the recommendations produced.

Why it is considered a good practice

Although *Roma Child VOICE* is not a direct intervention aimed at preventing early marriage, it represents a promising practice in the generation of evidence based on

¹ [Παρουσίαση αποτελεσμάτων του έργου Roma Child VOICE.](#)

the active participation of Roma communities themselves. The initiative also highlights the added value of combining scientific research with intercultural mediation, contributing to the development of more informed, culturally competent policies and practices centred on the rights of children.

ROMplat2019²

Lead organisation: Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Their Associates, in collaboration with public authorities and civil society organisations.

ROMplat2019 is a national participatory governance platform that promotes cooperation between Roma mediators, public authorities, civil society organisations and representatives of Roma communities, with the aim of strengthening social inclusion and improving responses to the needs of these communities. The initiative seeks to ensure that public policies are developed through participatory processes that recognise and value the knowledge and lived experience of Roma communities.

Within the framework of the initiative, a series of consultation workshops was organised to gather the perspectives of Roma communities and develop evidence-based public policy recommendations on early marriage.

Innovative features

The practice's principal innovative feature lies in recognising Roma mediators as permanent partners in the design, implementation and monitoring of public policies, thereby strengthening coordination across the education, health, social protection and equality sectors. This approach promotes greater institutional coordination, improves communication between public services and Roma communities, and contributes to the development of more inclusive and culturally competent responses.

Why it is considered a good practice

Although *ROMplat2019* is not a direct intervention for the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood, it represents a promising practice by establishing permanent mechanisms for community participation and interinstitutional cooperation. These mechanisms are essential for supporting more effective public policies that promote the rights of Roma children and Roma women.

² [EN-30-NEWSLETTER-FINAL-CONFERENCE.pdf](#).

3.2 Ireland

The Irish practices place a strong emphasis on the empowerment of Roma women, multilingual access to information, maternal healthcare and the adaptation of public services.

DROM Ireland: Roma Peer Support for Health, Education & Equity³

Lead organisation: Cairde.

DROM Ireland: Roma Peer Support for Health, Education & Equity is a community empowerment and leadership initiative aimed at Roma women, delivered by Cairde, and funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The programme supports five Roma women in becoming Peer Support Workers through a tailored pathway of education, training and mentoring. This includes English language learning, literacy and digital skills, accredited qualifications, maternal health and mental health, equality and rights, civic participation, and knowledge of public services.

Innovative features

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in training Roma women as peer support workers capable of building bridges between Roma communities and public services. As trusted intermediaries, these women support other Roma women in accessing information, healthcare, education, maternity services and the exercise of their rights, helping to overcome linguistic, cultural and institutional barriers.

Why it is considered a good practice

DROM Ireland represents a promising practice because it combines individual empowerment, accredited training, community leadership and peer support. By promoting women's autonomy and strengthening communities' capacity to address their own challenges through sustainable models of participation and mutual support, the programme contributes to long-term social inclusion.

National Roma Infoline⁴

Lead organisation: Cairde.

Established in 2020, the *National Roma Infoline* is a nationwide information and guidance service delivered by Cairde to support Roma individuals and families in

³ [Roma Programme - Cairde](#)

⁴ [Roma Programme - Cairde](#)

accessing public services and exercising their rights. The service provides information, advice and referrals in areas including healthcare, education, housing, and employment, seeking to overcome the linguistic, administrative and institutional barriers that often hinder access to public services.

The Infoline is operated by Roma staff and provides assistance in Romani, Romanian and English, supporting both members of Roma communities and professionals working within public services and service-providing organisations. Since its establishment, it has handled more than 12,000 calls from members of Roma communities, public services, and community organisations, with a particular focus on healthcare and housing.

Innovative features

The service's principal innovative feature lies in providing accessible, culturally competent support tailored to the needs of Roma communities, acting as a bridge between service users and public services. Beyond responding to immediate needs, it also contributes to increasing awareness of and access to available rights and services.

Why it is considered a good practice

The National Roma Infoline represents a promising practice because it facilitates access to fundamental rights, strengthens Roma communities' trust in public services and contributes to reducing inequalities in access to healthcare, housing, and education. By improving access to information and institutional support, it also creates favourable conditions for preventing situations of vulnerability, including early marriage and early motherhood.

Study on Roma Women's Experiences of Maternity Services⁵

Lead organisation: University College Dublin (UCD), Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, Education and Innovation in Health Systems (IRIS), in partnership with the National Quality & Patient Safety Unit (HSE), the National Women and Infants Health Programme (NWIHP), and the Roma Programme, Cairde.

A study conducted by the UCD IRIS Centre and other partners aims to develop a national suite of measures for the quality and safety of maternity and neonatal services. In collaboration with Cairde, the study engaged Roma women to better understand their experiences in accessing and using maternity services in Ireland. The study identifies linguistic, cultural and institutional barriers that affect access

⁵ [Understanding a Minority Group's \(Roma\) Experiences of Access and Quality in Maternity Services](#)

to high-quality maternity care, while giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of Roma women themselves.

Innovative features

The study was based on the principles of co-design, reciprocity and community led interpretation of findings, providing an example of cross-sectoral cooperation and research focused on a minority community. Roma women were involved not only in contributing data but also in the contextualisation and interpretation of the experiences identified, strengthening the relevance and credibility of the study. One of the project's main lessons is that meaningful participation requires time, resources and co-produced processes from the early stages of research. Replicating this approach would require strong partnerships with Roma organisations and communities, flexibility in adapting research processes, and adequate resources to support meaningful participation throughout the research process.

Why it is considered a good practice

This initiative represents a promising practice because it generates evidence that supports improvements in maternal healthcare services and contributes to reducing inequalities in access to care.

Teenage Pregnancy Service – Rotunda Hospital⁶

Lead organisation: Rotunda Hospital (Dublin).

The Teenage Pregnancy Service, established by Rotunda Hospital in 2005, is a specialised service providing comprehensive support to pregnant adolescents through clinical care, psychosocial support and guidance throughout pregnancy and the postnatal period. The service brings together a range of professionals and support services, promoting an integrated response to the needs of young mothers.

In 2025, the service completed an evaluation covering the period 2005–2022. The findings showed that although teenage pregnancy had declined overall among women attending the hospital, the proportion of Roma teenage mothers had increased. Data for 2024 indicated that 47% of service users were non-Irish nationals, with Romanian being the most frequently spoken language, and that 35% were identified as Roma or Romanian. Many were living in situations of

⁶ [Gynaecology – The Rotunda Hospital](#)

vulnerability, required interpreting services and faced significant barriers in accessing basic healthcare.

Innovative features

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in its person-centred, multidisciplinary model of care, combining healthcare, emotional support, health education, referral to community resources and coordination with wider social and educational support services.

Why it is considered a good practice

The Teenage Pregnancy Service represents a promising practice because it demonstrates the importance of specialised, integrated, and accessible services for pregnant adolescents. In doing so, it contributes to improved health outcomes, strengthens support for young parents and helps reduce situations of social vulnerability.

3.3 Portugal

The Portuguese practices address a range of protective factors, including school retention, health, intercultural mediation, women's leadership and participatory knowledge generation.

ROMA Educa⁷

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

ROMA Educa 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 students attending the third cycle of basic education.

ROMA Educa is a national scholarship programme for Roma students designed to promote school retention and educational success by reducing financial barriers and encouraging progression to secondary and higher education. In addition to financial support, the programme helps strengthen educational aspirations and promotes educational achievement as a pathway to social inclusion and personal development.

⁷ [Programa-roma-educa_regulamento-7a-edicao.pdf](#)

Initially supporting 50 Roma students in the 2019/2020 academic year, the programme has expanded significantly and currently awards 210 scholarships each year to Roma students attending lower secondary and secondary education, demonstrating both its institutional consolidation and growing national reach.

Innovative features

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in promoting education as a strategy for empowerment and equal opportunities for young Roma people, recognising educational success as a key factor in breaking cycles of exclusion and expanding opportunities for social and professional participation.

Why it is considered a good practice

ROMA Educa represents a good practice because it promotes continuity in educational pathways and strengthens the autonomy of young Roma people. By encouraging students to remain in education and pursue higher education, it contributes to delaying trajectories of early marriage and early motherhood while expanding opportunities to make informed choices and develop independent life projects.

OPRE – Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education⁸

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

The *OPRE – Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education* began in 2016 as a pilot project developed by a Roma-led association together with other civil society organisations. It aims to promote access to, retention in and successful completion of higher education by students of Roma origin. The positive results achieved led to its consolidation as a public policy measure, reflecting institutional recognition of its effectiveness and of the importance of investing in education as a tool for social inclusion and equal opportunities.

OPRE provides scholarships and individual mentoring throughout participants' academic journeys, seeking to reduce inequalities in access to higher education while strengthening the participation of young Roma people in academic, professional and civic life.

⁸ [Regulamentoopre_10aed.pdf](#)

Since its launch in 2016, *OPRE* has awarded, on average, around 30 scholarships per year to Roma students pursuing higher education. By the eighth edition, the programme had awarded 249 scholarships and contributed to the completion of 37 bachelor's degrees and nine master's degrees, illustrating its sustained impact on widening Roma participation in higher education

Innovative features

The programme's principal innovative feature lies in combining financial support with mentoring, skills development and the creation of support networks, promoting not only academic success but also the emergence of a new generation of Roma professionals and leaders capable of acting as **role models** within their communities.

Why it is considered a good practice

OPRE represents a promising practice because it demonstrates how an innovative civil society initiative can evolve into a sustainable public policy with greater continuity and impact. Originally developed by civil society, with the strong involvement of Roma people and Roma organisations, the programme has successfully evolved into a nationwide public policy measure. It is currently implemented through a partnership between AIMA and Associação Letras Nómadas, combining institutional commitment with the experience and leadership of a Roma-led organisation.

By promoting equal opportunities in access to higher education and strengthening the autonomy and empowerment of young Roma people, the programme contributes to the development of alternative life trajectories and to reducing vulnerability factors associated with early school leaving, early marriage and early motherhood.

Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF): Community-Based Intervention and the Promotion of Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Matosinhos⁹

⁹ [APF Norte - APE](#)

Lead organisation: Portuguese Association for Family Planning (APF), in partnership with the Municipality of Matosinhos, healthcare services and other local organisations.

For several years, **APF** has implemented a community-based outreach intervention with the Roma community living in the Biquinha neighbourhood in Matosinhos. Its objectives focus on health education, particularly sexual and reproductive health and maternal and child health. The intervention is based on a relationship of trust established with the community and on close cooperation with healthcare services, the municipality and other local organisations, enabling an integrated response to the needs of Roma families.

Innovative features

The principal innovative feature of the intervention lies in combining community mediation, health promotion and multi-agency cooperation through a participatory and culturally sensitive approach that facilitates access to services, strengthens health literacy and promotes the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights.

Throughout the intervention, **APF** has implemented a number of thematic initiatives, including the Sem Preconceitos (*Without Prejudice*) project, which promotes gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and the prevention of situations of vulnerability among Roma adolescents and young adults.

APF also participated in the transnational project EU Roadmap on Forced and Early Marriage for Frontline Professionals (Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme – JUST/2014/RDAP/AG/HARM), which developed a roadmap for frontline professionals working in areas such as healthcare and education. The roadmap aims to strengthen professionals' capacity to identify situations of forced and/or early marriage and to improve the protection and support provided to victims.

Why it is considered a good practice

The **APF** intervention represents a promising practice because it demonstrates that long-term community outreach, combined with interinstitutional cooperation and the active involvement of Roma communities, contributes to reducing inequalities in access to healthcare, strengthening the autonomy of Roma women and young people, and creating favourable conditions for preventing early marriage and early motherhood.

Roma Associations – Dynamism and Change

One of the distinguishing features of the Portuguese experience is the progressive strengthening of the Roma associative movement and the recognition of Roma organisations as strategic partners in public policy. Organisations such as AMUCIP¹⁰, Associação Letras Nómadas¹¹, Ribaltambição¹² and, more recently, Rizoma¹³, have increasingly assumed a central role in promoting education, gender equality, community participation and the empowerment of Roma women and young people.

These organisations have developed a range of targeted projects, many of which focus on promoting educational success and challenging stereotypes. In this context, and although only indirectly related to the main theme of this report, Ribaltambição – Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities launched the campaign "Roma Voices: The Reality of Marriage in Our Communities", which challenges the widespread misconception that forced marriage is a common and generalised practice among Roma communities in Portugal. The campaign includes a documentary featuring testimonies from Roma couples, community leaders, academics and activists, promoting a more nuanced understanding of marriage within Roma communities while highlighting the diversity of experiences and the leadership of Roma women.¹⁴

More recently, RIZOMA, an organisation led by a young Roma graduate who benefited from the OPRE scholarship programme and who participated in the Roma Influencers project as both a Roma Influencer and a trainer, is currently implementing a gender equality project aimed at Roma children and young people. Through this initiative, the organisation seeks to promote equal opportunities, empower Roma girls and young women, and foster more equitable gender relations through education, communication and community engagement.

In addition, their work helps bring public policies closer to Roma communities, promotes solutions developed in partnership with those communities and strengthens the participation of Roma people themselves in shaping the responses that affect their lives. This evolution reflects a shift from approaches designed for Roma communities towards intervention models developed with Roma communities and, increasingly, led by Roma organisations.

Why it is considered a good practice

¹⁰ [\(14\) Facebook](#)

¹¹ [\(2\) Instagram](#)

¹² [\(14\) Facebook](#)

¹³ [About 5 — Rizoma](#)

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/FvH2jbaVv-U>

The strengthening of the Roma associative movement constitutes, in itself, a good practice in participatory governance, enabling Roma communities to play an increasingly active role in the design, implementation and monitoring of the public policies that affect them.

3.4 Romania

The Romanian experience highlights the importance of community-based interventions delivered by people who know the communities, speak their language and have established relationships of trust with families. Among its most significant features are the network of Roma health mediators, the involvement of Roma women as agents of change, and the integration of health, education, social protection and local authorities.

Roma Health Mediation as a Tool for Prevention and Access to Rights

Lead organisation: Sastipen – Roma Centre for Health Policies, in cooperation with the national network of Roma health mediators, the Public Health Directorate, local authorities, and health, education and social protection services.

Context and objectives

Roma health mediation is a community-based response designed to reduce the barriers that prevent Roma communities from accessing public services. In the context of preventing early marriage and early motherhood, health mediators play a key role in providing information, health education, identifying situations of risk, offering guidance, making referrals and facilitating coordination with the relevant public services.

Within the framework of the Roma Influencers project, health mediation can be regarded as a promising practice because it combines close links with Roma communities, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and the capacity to coordinate action across different sectors.

Health mediators do not simply act as providers of information. They serve as trusted bridges between families and institutions, making it possible to address sensitive issues—such as sexuality, contraception, marriage, pregnancy, violence and early school leaving—that would often be difficult to discuss with professionals who are external to the community.

The practice is particularly relevant because it addresses several of the factors associated with early marriage and early motherhood, including limited access to information on sexual and reproductive health, insufficient awareness of the rights of children and women, the distance between families and public services,

difficulties in identifying situations of risk at an early stage, and a lack of trust in public institutions.

Innovative features

The principal innovative feature of this practice lies in recognising Roma health mediators not only as facilitators of access to healthcare but also as community professionals capable of promoting prevention, strengthening trust in public institutions and supporting coordinated interventions involving health, education and social protection services. Romania has progressively strengthened this model through the professionalisation of health mediators and the consolidation of a national network, which currently includes around 460 active Roma health mediators.

Why it is considered a good practice

Roma health mediation represents a good practice because it combines proximity to Roma communities with professional expertise and strong interinstitutional cooperation. By promoting access to healthcare, facilitating early identification of vulnerable situations and strengthening communication between communities and public services, it creates favourable conditions for preventing early marriage and early motherhood while promoting the rights, health and well-being of Roma women, children and families.

Participatory Development of a Community-Based and Multi-Sectoral Guide¹⁵

Lead organisation: Sastipen, with the participation of Roma health and school mediators, Roma women and young people, professionals from the education, health, social work and psychology sectors, public authorities and Roma organisations.

The Roma Influencers Guidebook was designed as a practical resource to support professionals and community workers in the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood.

Its development included a review of studies, legislation and reports; the collection of experiences from health mediators; consultations and focus groups held in Bucharest, Giurgiu and Neamţ; the participation of young Roma women; drafting in an accessible format; and validation by both experts and members of Roma communities.

¹⁵ [SASTIPEN — Roma Center for Health Policies](#)

The working group brought together representatives from a wide range of sectors and institutions, including professionals working in healthcare, education, social work and psychology, local authorities, Roma organisations and young people from Roma communities.

Its principal contribution lies not only in the final publication itself but also in the co-production process through which it was developed. Scientific and professional knowledge was combined with the practical experience of health mediators, young Roma women and members of Roma communities.

The methodology therefore seeks to avoid two common risks: producing technically accurate materials that are culturally inappropriate and developing community interventions without a sufficiently robust scientific or legal foundation.

Innovative features

The principal innovative feature of the Guidebook lies in its participatory methodology, which places Roma women, young people and community mediators at the centre of the knowledge-production process. Rather than relying exclusively on academic expertise, it combines scientific evidence, professional practice and community knowledge to produce guidance that is both technically robust and culturally appropriate.

Why it is considered a good practice

This promising practice highlights the importance of ensuring that prevention messages are culturally appropriate, accepted by families and practically useful for both mediators and professionals. It also demonstrates the value of involving Roma women and young people directly in defining the responses intended to address the challenges faced by their own communities

4. European and Transnational Good Practices

The initiatives presented in this section have been developed across several countries or within the framework of European programmes. They should therefore be analysed separately from the national practices described in the previous chapter.

Roma Influencers Network – Breaking the Circle of Early Marriages and Early Motherhood

Lead organisations: Klimaka (Greece); Cairde (Ireland); CESIS and CooperActiva (Portugal); Sastipen (Romania)

Funding: Erasmus+ Programme

Implemented between November 2024 and October 2026, the *Roma Influencers Network – Breaking the Circle of Early Marriages and Early Motherhood* project is presented as a promising transnational practice, as it has developed an integrated methodology specifically designed to prevent early marriage and early motherhood among Roma women and Roma communities.

The project has undertaken comparative research across the four partner countries, producing four national reports and one comparative European report. It has also developed educational and awareness-raising materials, implemented training programmes and established a transnational network of Roma Influencers. The research involved 184 Roma women, generating valuable evidence on the factors associated with early marriage and early motherhood and supporting the formulation of recommendations for community interventions and public policies.

The project also delivered tailored training programmes, initially involving 25 Roma women, some of whom subsequently became trainers for additional groups of women in each participating country. The women taking part in this training process also assumed an active role as Roma Influencers within their own communities by leading in a total of 72 awareness-raising campaigns and contributing to the production of audiovisual materials on early marriage and early motherhood that can be used by other organisations. As the culmination of this process, the project has produced a wide range of educational and awareness-raising resources, including community campaigns, audiovisual materials and a transnational documentary that has been presented at several international festivals.

Although the project is still ongoing and no impact evaluation is yet available, the implementation results already demonstrate a strong capacity to mobilise communities, generate comparable evidence across countries, strengthen the leadership of Roma women and develop resources with considerable transfer potential.

Innovative features

The project's principal innovative feature lies in placing Roma women themselves at the centre of the intervention—not merely as beneficiaries, but as active participants in knowledge production, community awareness-raising and the development of proposals for change. The methodology is based on empowering Roma women to act as positive influencers, peer supporters and community mobilisers, building on their knowledge, lived experience and ability to communicate effectively with other women, girls and families.

Another important feature is its participatory and culturally sensitive approach. Roma women are actively involved in identifying barriers, shaping key messages, validating educational materials and engaging directly with their communities. This participatory process enhances the credibility of the intervention while reducing the risk of external or stigmatising approaches.

Despite the differences between the four participating countries, the project highlights a common set of principles, including the importance of education, mediation, access to healthcare, the leadership of Roma women, peer support and cooperation between communities, public services and policy makers.

Why it is considered a good practice

The project may be regarded as a promising practice because it:

- addresses directly an issue that remains insufficiently visible and under-researched;
- promotes the leadership and active participation of Roma women;
- combines prevention, empowerment, awareness-raising and policy advocacy;
- engages families and communities rather than focusing exclusively on individuals;
- produces resources that can be transferred to other contexts;
- promotes mutual learning between countries; and

- strengthens the links between community experience and public policy development.

ROMED – European Programme for Roma Mediators¹⁶

The *ROMED Programme* was developed by the Council of Europe, in cooperation with the European Commission, with the objective of improving the quality and effectiveness of mediation between Roma communities and public institutions. It was based on the recognition that many Roma continue to experience persistent barriers in accessing rights, services and resources, resulting not only from poverty and social exclusion but also from discrimination, lack of information, cultural and institutional distance and limited trust in public services.

Through the training of mediators, *ROMED* sought to strengthen intervention capacity across several areas that are central to social inclusion.

Mediators act as a bridge between Roma communities and public institutions by facilitating communication, improving access to information, supporting referrals and ensuring that the needs and perspectives of Roma communities are taken into account by public authorities.

The relevance of *ROMED* to the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood lies primarily in mediators' capacity to address many of the underlying risk factors associated with these phenomena. Their close relationship with families and their knowledge of community contexts facilitate:

- the dissemination of information on the rights of children and women;
- the promotion of girls' continued participation in education;
- access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and family planning;
- the early identification of situations involving school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, violence, coercion or marriages involving minors;
- referrals to health, education, social protection and child protection services;
- dialogue with families and community leaders regarding the consequences of early marriage and early motherhood; and

¹⁶ [Home | ROMED](#)

- improved coordination between professionals and institutions that might otherwise operate in isolation.

ROMED is also distinguished by its human rights-based approach. Mediation is not viewed merely as a means of overcoming communication barriers but as an instrument for reducing inequalities, combating discrimination and facilitating the exercise of fundamental rights. This perspective is particularly relevant in addressing early marriage, as it avoids stigmatising specific practices or attributing them indiscriminately to all Roma communities.

ROMACT – Strengthening Local Governance to Promote the Inclusion of Roma Communities¹⁷

ROMACT is a joint initiative of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, designed to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to develop, implement and monitor local policies for Roma inclusion. The programme is based on the recognition that reducing inequalities requires sustainable local responses built on community participation and cooperation between public services.

The *ROMACT* methodology combines institutional capacity-building within municipalities with the active participation of Roma communities in identifying needs and defining intervention priorities. Its principal components include:

- participatory assessments of local needs and available resources;
- the establishment of community groups and participation mechanisms for Roma communities;
- capacity-building for local elected representatives, municipal staff and other local stakeholders; and
- the development of local action plans for Roma inclusion.

Like several of the initiatives presented in this report, *ROMACT* was not specifically designed to prevent early marriage or early motherhood. Nevertheless, it addresses a number of structural factors that increase the vulnerability of Roma children and young people, including unequal access to healthcare, particularly sexual and reproductive healthcare.

The relevance of the *ROMACT* approach lies in recognising that issues such as early marriage require coherent local policies capable of expanding educational opportunities, improving access to public services, reducing inequalities and strengthening community participation in identifying solutions.

¹⁷ [ROMACT - BUILDING CAPACITY FOR ROMA INCLUSION AT LOCAL LEVEL](#)

Innovative features

One of *ROMACT's* principal innovative features is its strong emphasis on participatory local governance. Rather than treating Roma communities solely as beneficiaries of public policies, the programme promotes their active participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of local initiatives. At the same time, it strengthens municipalities' capacity to develop integrated, evidence-based responses adapted to local circumstances, thereby supporting the sustainability of inclusion policies and creating more favourable conditions for preventing early marriage and early motherhood.

INSCHOOL – Promoting More Inclusive Education Systems for Roma Children¹⁸

INSCHOOL – Inclusive Schools: Making a Difference for Roma Children is a joint initiative of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, implemented between 2017 and 2024 through three successive phases. Throughout its implementation, it involved the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, the Slovak Republic, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria and Portugal, supporting the development of inclusive education policies and innovative practices designed to improve access to education, participation and educational achievement among Roma children and other children at risk of marginalisation.

The programme is based on the principle that the inclusion of Roma children depends not only on individual effort or family support but also on changes in teaching practice, school organisation and education policy. Accordingly, it seeks to create more inclusive school environments capable of responding to diversity and valuing the participation of all children.

The *INSCHOOL* methodology combines several complementary levels of intervention, including:

- training for teachers, school leaders and other education professionals;
- the development and dissemination of inclusive teaching practices;
- the promotion of school environments free from discrimination and segregation; and
- the active involvement of families and Roma communities in school life.

The programme recognises that sustained participation in education expands girls' educational and professional opportunities, strengthens their autonomy, improves

¹⁸ [Inschool Project - Inclusive schools Making a difference for Roma children](#)

access to information on rights and sexual and reproductive health, and creates future aspirations that are incompatible with early school leaving.

Why it is considered a good practice

INSCHOOL represents a particularly relevant good practice because it demonstrates that educational inclusion depends upon shared responsibility between students, families, schools, communities and policy-makers. By promoting more inclusive and participatory education systems, it creates conditions that support girls' continued participation in education while reducing vulnerability factors associated with early marriage and early motherhood.

BREAKING A TABOO – Promoting Social Norm Change through Community Dialogue

Breaking a TABOO is a transnational initiative implemented in Germany, Greece, Serbia, Hungary, Spain, Romania and North Macedonia, aiming to prevent child, early and forced marriage through the promotion of gender equality, the participation of Roma communities and the transformation of social norms that restrict the rights and opportunities of girls.

The project is based on the recognition that early marriage results from the interaction of multiple factors—including poverty, gender inequalities, early school leaving, discrimination, family expectations and social norms—and therefore requires interventions that promote critical reflection and the active participation of Roma communities themselves.

Its methodology combines several complementary components, including:

- empowering Roma women and young people as agents of change;
- creating safe spaces for intergenerational and intercultural dialogue;
- implementing community awareness-raising activities;
- engaging families, community leaders and professionals; and
- developing educational resources and communication materials.

Among the documented outputs are documentary films, the training of mediators and multipliers, and the organisation of 70 community film screenings and discussion sessions. These sessions used personal stories and participatory methodologies to stimulate dialogue on early marriage, gender relations, education and girls' autonomy. The experience demonstrated that narratives developed and shared by communities themselves can provide particularly

effective tools for addressing sensitive issues without relying on moralising or stigmatising messages.

Replicating this methodology requires the active participation of communities, locally trusted facilitators, safe spaces for dialogue and culturally appropriate communication.

Innovative features

The project's principal innovative feature lies in its focus on transforming social norms through community dialogue. Rather than approaching early marriage solely as a legal or individual issue, the project seeks to create opportunities for communities themselves to reflect on the consequences of these practices, explore alternatives and promote new models of participation, education and autonomy for girls.

The project values the active participation of Roma women, young people, families and community organisations, thereby encouraging the development of culturally sensitive solutions while strengthening the legitimacy of both the messages conveyed and the actions undertaken.

Its transnational dimension also represents a significant added value, enabling the comparison of different national contexts, the identification of common challenges and the adaptation of methodologies to local realities.

Why it is considered a good practice

Breaking a TABOO may therefore be regarded as a promising practice, as it demonstrates that sustainable change depends on the transformation of social norms and power relations while simultaneously strengthening the leadership of Roma women and promoting dialogue between communities, professionals and public decision-makers.

5. Comparative Analysis of the Practices

5.1 From Preventing Early Marriage and Early Motherhood to Promoting Rights

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the practices identified share one fundamental characteristic: although they all contribute to the prevention of early marriage and early motherhood, they do so through markedly different strategies.

Some initiatives address these issues directly by encouraging community reflection on the rights of children and women, challenging gender stereotypes or implementing awareness-raising campaigns specifically focused on early marriage. This is the case of the *Roma Influencers Network* (transnational), *Breaking a TABOO* (transnational) and the *Roma Influencers Guidebook* (Romania), developed as part of the Roma Influencers project.

Most of the practices, however, were not specifically designed to prevent early marriage. Instead, they address the structural factors that increase the vulnerability of Roma girls. These include programmes promoting school retention, intercultural mediation, access to healthcare, peer support, participatory governance, research and the strengthening of Roma organisations.

This distinction demonstrates that prevention does not depend exclusively on campaigns directly targeting the phenomenon itself. Rather, it results from combining interventions aimed at changing behaviours with policies that expand the educational, social and economic opportunities available to Roma girls and women. This integrated approach is consistent with both the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation (2020–2030) and the Council of Europe Strategy for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2026–2030), which emphasise equality, participation and the removal of structural barriers affecting Roma communities.

5.2 Education as the Main Protective Factor

Education emerges as the most consistent common element across the practices analysed.

However, the different countries address this dimension through complementary approaches.

Portugal prioritises school retention and educational success through scholarship schemes and mentoring programmes, such as *ROMA Educa* and *OPRE*.

The Council of Europe's *INSCHOOL* initiative demonstrates that educational continuity depends not only on supporting families but also on creating inclusive schools, preparing teachers to work in multicultural settings and implementing education policies capable of reducing school segregation.

In Ireland, education also encompasses adult learning through the accredited training of *Roma Peer Support Workers*, demonstrating that lifelong learning represents an important instrument for the empowerment of Roma women.

In Greece and Romania, education is embedded within broader strategies promoting community participation, the protection of rights and prevention.

Taken together, these experiences demonstrate that keeping girls in education is probably the most important protective factor identified among the practices reviewed. At the same time, they show that education can only produce sustainable outcomes when accompanied by inclusive school environments, financial support, mediation, family engagement and positive expectations regarding girls' future opportunities.

5.3 Access to Rights and Public Services

Another common theme concerns the need to bring Roma communities closer to public services.

The experiences analysed demonstrate that access to healthcare, education, social protection and justice continues to be constrained by linguistic, cultural and administrative barriers and, frequently, by discrimination.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect are:

- *ROMED*, through intercultural mediation;
- the *National Roma Infoline*, developed in Ireland by Cairde, as a multilingual information service;
- the *Romanian Roma health mediation network*; and
- the community-based intervention implemented by *APF* in Portugal.

These initiatives demonstrate that effective access to rights requires well-trained professionals, culturally competent public services and mediators drawn from Roma communities themselves.

Intercultural mediation therefore emerges not as a temporary mechanism but as a specialised function that is essential for reducing inequalities and strengthening trust between communities and public institutions.

5.4 Community Participation and the Leadership of Roma Women

All of the practices analysed recognise that Roma communities should no longer be regarded solely as beneficiaries of public policies.

The most innovative feature identified is the growing recognition of the participation of Roma communities themselves, and particularly of Roma women.

Across the initiatives reviewed, Roma women undertake a wide range of roles, including:

- mediators;
- researchers;
- peer support workers;
- community leaders;
- trainers;
- leaders of Roma organisations; and
- influencers.

Particularly noteworthy is the work carried out by Roma women's organisations such as *AMUCIP*, *Ribaltambição* and, more recently, *Rizoma*, which have played an increasingly important role in promoting change regarding gender roles within Roma communities.

This development represents a significant shift away from earlier approaches that were largely characterised by external interventions led by non-Roma professionals.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the most sustainable practices are those that invest in building capacity within Roma communities themselves, strengthening their leadership in identifying problems, designing solutions and evaluating interventions.

5.5 From Individual Intervention to Systemic Change

The practices analysed also operate at different levels of intervention.

Some work directly with individuals and families, while others seek to transform institutions, organisations or public policies.

This complementarity constitutes one of the report's principal conclusions.

Taken together, the initiatives reviewed demonstrate that preventing early marriage requires simultaneous action across five interconnected dimensions:

- individuals;
- families and communities;
- public services;
- institutions; and
- public policies.

Within this context, the complementarity between the European programmes is particularly evident:

- *ROMED* strengthens mediation between communities and public services.
- *ROMACT* reinforces local governance and institutional capacity.
- *INSCHOOL* promotes more inclusive education systems.
- *Breaking a TABOO* seeks to transform social norms and gender relations.
- *Roma Influencers Network* focuses on the empowerment and leadership of Roma women.

Rather than addressing the same issue through identical methodologies, these initiatives demonstrate that effective prevention requires coordinated interventions operating simultaneously at different levels.

5.6 Knowledge Generation, Evidence and Participatory Governance

The Greek experience demonstrates that prevention also depends upon knowledge generation and the quality of governance.

The *Roma Child VOICE* and *ROMplat2019* initiatives illustrate how participatory research, systematic consultation with Roma communities and the involvement of Roma people in the design, implementation and monitoring of public policies are

essential for developing interventions that are more appropriate, legitimate and sustainable.

Preventing early marriage therefore depends not only on the existence of services or specific programmes but also on the capacity to generate evidence, incorporate community knowledge and translate that knowledge into effective public policies.

5.7 Available Evidence and Future Challenges

Despite the quality of the practices identified, the comparative analysis also highlights several important limitations.

Most initiatives provide comprehensive documentation regarding the activities undertaken, community participation and the outputs produced.

However, evidence concerning medium- and long-term impacts remains limited.

Few projects systematically measure changes in indicators such as:

- age at marriage;
- adolescent pregnancy;
- early school leaving;
- economic autonomy;
- civic participation; or
- sustained access to public services.

This limitation is particularly significant in a field where social change often depends upon long-term processes and the interaction of multiple factors.

Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems therefore represents one of the principal challenges identified by this report.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms that the most promising responses are those that combine education, access to rights, community participation, knowledge generation and participatory governance. This conclusion is fully aligned with the strategic priorities established by both the European Union and the Council of Europe, which advocate integrated, rights-based approaches founded on equality, meaningful participation and partnership with Roma communities.

6. Conclusions

The analysis undertaken in this report identifies five broad models of intervention which, although distinct, prove to be complementary in preventing early marriage and early motherhood within Roma communities. Rather than representing alternative responses, these approaches address different risk and protective factors, demonstrating that the most promising strategies combine interventions targeting individuals, communities, public services, institutions and public policies. The following table summarises the main contributions of the practices analysed.

Table 1. Main intervention models identified in the practices analysed

1  **Education and educational opportunities**

 MAIN OBJECTIVE	 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES	 CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTION
Promote school retention, educational achievement and continuity of learning pathways.	- ROMA Educa - OPRE - INSCHOOL	Reduces early school leaving, strengthens girls' autonomy and contributes to delaying early marriage and early motherhood.

2  **Access to rights, healthcare and public services**

 MAIN OBJECTIVE	 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES	 CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTION
Improve access to healthcare, education, social protection and other essential public services.	- APF - National Roma Infoline - Roma Health Mediation - ROMED	Reduces barriers to access, improves health literacy, facilitates early referrals and protects vulnerable situations.

3  **Empowerment, women's leadership and community participation**

 MAIN OBJECTIVE	 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES	 CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTION
Strengthen the capacity of Roma women to assume leadership roles and influence their communities.	- Roma Influencers Network - DROM Ireland - Breaking a TABOO - Roma organisations (AMUCIP, Ribaltambição, Rizoma)	Promotes positive role models, peer support, changes in social norms and stronger community participation.

4  **Knowledge generation and participatory research**

 MAIN OBJECTIVE	 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES	 CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTION
Produce evidence based on community participation and support evidence-informed decision-making.	- Roma Child VOICE - Study on Roma Women's Experiences of Maternity Services - Roma Influencers Guidebook	Improves understanding of the factors associated with early marriage, supports culturally appropriate responses and informs public policy.

5  **Participatory governance and public policy development**

 MAIN OBJECTIVE	 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES	 CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTION
Strengthen cooperation between communities, institutions and policy-makers.	- ROMplat2019 - ROMACT - Roma Influencers Network	Integrates Roma communities into the design, implementation and monitoring of public policies, reinforcing the sustainability of interventions.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that early marriage and early motherhood cannot be understood as isolated phenomena, nor can they be attributed solely to cultural factors. Across all the countries examined, these phenomena arise from the interaction of poverty, gender inequalities, early school leaving, discrimination, limited access to public services, reduced social participation and insufficient opportunities for Roma girls and women. This interpretation is consistent with the available European evidence, which advocates integrated and multi-sectoral approaches to preventing early marriage and promoting the rights of children and women.

The practices analysed also demonstrate that there is no single solution. On the contrary, the most promising responses combine a range of complementary strategies, including educational continuity, intercultural mediation, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, peer support, participatory research, the strengthening of Roma organisations, community participation, local governance and the development of evidence-based public policies.

Another particularly significant finding concerns the changing role of Roma women. In almost all the most innovative initiatives, Roma women are no longer regarded merely as beneficiaries of interventions but increasingly assume positions of leadership, mediation, research, training, institutional representation and community mobilisation. This shift represents one of the most consistent features identified across the practices reviewed and constitutes a fundamental condition for developing sustainable responses.

The analysis further demonstrates that the meaningful participation of Roma communities is not merely an ethical principle but a determining factor in the quality of interventions. Practices that have involved communities from the identification of needs through to the evaluation of outcomes have demonstrated greater cultural relevance, stronger trust between institutions and communities, and greater potential for transfer to other contexts.

The comparison of the experiences from Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania demonstrates that the most promising responses are not those addressing a single risk factor but those combining multiple levels of intervention. Inclusive education, access to healthcare, intercultural mediation, knowledge generation, participatory governance, the strengthening of Roma organisations, the empowerment of Roma women and policy dialogue constitute complementary dimensions of a comprehensive prevention strategy. Taken together, these practices demonstrate that preventing early marriage and early motherhood requires a human rights-based approach, developed with Roma communities rather than simply for them. This approach is fully aligned with the most recent priorities of both the Council of

Europe and the European Union, which identify meaningful participation, gender equality, knowledge generation and good governance as essential conditions for achieving sustainable change.

Taken together, the practices identified demonstrate that preventing early marriage and early motherhood means creating the conditions for all Roma children and young people to exercise their rights fully, remain in education, participate in decisions affecting their lives and build life projects that are free, autonomous and based on their own choices. Ultimately, this is the central message of the present report.