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Evolving Role of Roma Women in Contemporary Montenegrin Society: Challenges of Early and Underage Marriage

A roma nők változó szerepe a mai modern montenegrói társadalomban: a korai és nagykorúság előtt kötött házasságok kihívásai

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ABSTRACT

Roma women in Montenegro stand at the crossroads of tradition and social transformation, reflecting both the resilience and structural challenges faced by their communities. This paper examines the evolving role of Roma women in contemporary Montenegrin society, with particular attention to the persistence of early and underage marriage and its impact on girls' education, autonomy, and social participation. Using a sociological analytical approach based on existing literature, policy documents, and reports from organisations such as UNICEF, UNDP, and the European Roma Rights Centre, the study explores how cultural norms, poverty, and gender inequality interact to shape the life opportunities of Roma girls. At the same time, the paper highlights the growing role of Roma women's activism and community initiatives in challenging restrictive norms and promoting education and empowerment. The findings suggest that Roma women are not only affected by social exclusion but are increasingly emerging as important agents of social change and integration within Montenegrin society.

Kulcsszavak:

roma nők,
korai házasság,
társadalmi kirekesztés,
nemek közti egyenlőség,
Montenegró

A hagyományok és társadalmi változások - melyek egyszerre reflektálnak a közösség ellenállóképességére és strukturális kihívásaira - válaszút elé állítják a montenegrói roma nőket. Ez a tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogy miként alakul a roma nők helyzete a mai modern montenegrói társadalomban; különös tekintettel a még mindig létező korai és nagykorúság előtt kötött házasságokra, hogy miként befolyásolja mindez a lányok tanulását, autonómiáját és társadalmi részvételét. A tanulmány analitikus szociológiai megközelítést alkalmaz, amely a meglévő szakirodalomra, szakpolitikai dokumentumokra és olyan szervezetek jelentéseire épül, mint az UNICEF, az UNDP és az Európai Roma Jogok Központja, és azt vizsgálja, hogy a milyen kölcsönhatásban vannak a kulturális normák, a szegénység és a nemek közötti egyenlőtlenség, s hogy ezek miként alakítják a lányok életlehetőségeit. Ezzel egyidejűleg a tanulmány megvilágítja a roma nők aktivizmusát és a közösség kezdeményezéseit, melyek során megkérdőjelezzik a szűkítő normákat, ugyanakkor népszerűsítik az oktatást és a felhatalmazást. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a roma nőket nemcsak a társadalmi kirekesztés érinti, hanem fontos előmozdítói a társadalmi változásnak és integrációnak a montenegrói társadalomban.

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Introduction

Roma communities across Europe have long experienced social marginalisation, discrimination, and limited access to education, employment, and social services. Within this broader context, they often occupy a particularly complex position shaped by both ethnic and gender-based inequalities. Reports from international organisations and human rights institutions consistently show that Roma women encounter multiple forms of exclusion that affect their opportunities for education, economic participation, and social mobility. Sociologist Danijela Vuković-Ćalasan argues that systemic discrimination against Roma remains deeply embedded in Montenegrin society. The practices are prominent against Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, particularly in areas such as education, housing, employment, and political participation. The Centre for Civic Education (CGO¹) also reports that Roma people are practically invisible in Montenegrin public life (Kavarić Mandić, 2025; Etv, 2025). These challenges are especially visible in issues such as early and underage marriage. This continues to affect

¹In Serbian *Centar za Gradjansko obrazovanje*

Roma girls across parts of the Balkans and remains closely connected to patterns of poverty, educational exclusion, and gender inequality.

The terms Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian refer to distinct ethnic groups primarily located in the Western Balkans. While Roma are more widely recognised in international literature, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are region-specific groups with similar socio-economic challenges and histories of marginalisation. Due to these shared conditions, they are often analysed together in policy and research contexts.

Recent research by the Centre for Civic Education shows that public perceptions of discrimination against Roma have risen, indicating ongoing negative stereotypes and social exclusion. “The Roma are cited as the most discriminated group by far,” said Nikola Đurašević, emphasising that the perception of discrimination against minority peoples is polarised (CGO, 2024, p.2). These findings suggest that anti-Roma prejudice, often conceptualised in literature as anti-Romani racism or “Romaphobia” (McGarry, 2017), continues to shape both social attitudes and institutional responses toward Roma communities. Despite the perceived high priority on European political agendas across various governments, there is little change and certainly no understanding of why this continues to occur (McGarry, 2017; ERRC², 2019).

A statement such as “let it be, Gypsy business” made by a police officer when a woman in trouble calls the police reveals the everyday realities behind structural inequalities (ERRC, 2019). These situations illustrate how discrimination can discourage Roma women from seeking institutional protection and reinforce their social isolation. Similarly, accounts from young Roma girls highlight the personal consequences of traditional expectations surrounding early marriage. Zena Dubović, a mediator on a multidisciplinary team addressing family violence, notes that many young girls secretly get married. Publicly announcing these marriages is rare, as the community that allows them is aware of the social and legal consequences. As a result, society often realises that a marriage occurred only after the girl had gone missing. The team, in collaboration with the authorities, is working to put an end to this issue, but uncovering these underage marriages is challenging (Radio Berane, 2019).

The issue of early and underage marriage represents not only a cultural practice but also a broader sociological problem connected to social exclusion,

²ERRC - European Roma Rights Centre

poverty, and gender inequality. In Montenegro, as in other parts of the Western Balkans, Roma communities remain among the most socially and economically alienated groups. According to data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey conducted by UNICEF and MONSTAT, a significant proportion of Roma girls enter marriage or informal unions during adolescence, often before completing their education. Earlier survey data indicated that approximately 36% of Roma girls aged 15-19 were already married or living in union, a figure significantly higher than the national average (MONSTAT & UNICEF, 2019). These findings highlight the persistence of early marriage within isolated communities and underscore the importance of examining the broader social conditions that create the living realities of Roma girls and women.

At the same time, the challenges faced by Romani women cannot be understood solely through the lens of external discrimination. Sociological research increasingly emphasises the importance of examining internal community dynamics that shape gender relations and life opportunities. Roma women often experience overlapping forms of inequality at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, which together influence their social position and access to resources (Kóczé, 2011). Within some Roma communities, traditional gender norms and expectations surrounding family honour, marriage, and female behaviour continue to affect young girls. These often discourage continued education and limit women's autonomy in decision-making. Processes of empowerment are closely connected to both internal perceptions of agency and external access to resources. When women's access to resources is primarily mediated through family dependence, their capacity to make strategic life choices becomes notably constrained (Kabeer, 2005). In this context, early and arranged marriages can further restrict educational opportunities, economic independence, and broader social participation for Roma women.

Understanding this transformation requires a sociological perspective that considers both the structural factors that sustain early marriage and the social processes through which change becomes possible. Examining these dynamics in Montenegro also contributes to a broader understanding of similar challenges across other parts of the Balkans. Here, Roma communities continue to experience high levels of poverty, discrimination, and educational inequality despite ongoing policy efforts aimed at improving social inclusion. This paper, therefore, examines the evolving role of Roma women in

contemporary Montenegrin society. It focuses on the persistence of early and child marriage and how education, community activism, and policy interventions contribute to changes in gender roles within Roma communities.

In Montenegro, Roma communities represent one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged population groups. Many Roma settlements are characterised by limited infrastructure, lower levels of educational attainment, and restricted access to formal employment. For example, language barriers, informal economic practices, and social exclusion further reinforce marginalisation. These conditions create a structural environment in which early and underage marriage is more likely to occur, not only as a cultural practice but also as a response to economic insecurity and limited life opportunities (UNICEF, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Theoretical background

Social exclusion and the marginalisation of Roma communities

Roma communities across Europe have long experienced persistent social exclusion, discrimination, and economic segregation. Sociological research describes Roma as one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in Europe, facing structural inequalities in education, employment, housing, and access to public services:

In many societies, it is perfectly acceptable to denigrate Roma by invoking so-called traits and characteristics that all Roma supposedly possess. These qualities are invariably negative: Roma, as a group, are accused of criminality, deviancy, and living parasitic lifestyles (McGarry, 2017, p.4).

These inequalities are not solely the result of individual prejudice but are embedded within broader institutional and social structures that reproduce patterns of marginalisation. In the context of the Western Balkans, the social position of Roma communities is closely connected to historical processes of political transition, economic instability, and limited access to state institutions. As recent research on Roma inclusion in the region notes, Roma populations across Europe continue to face multiple structural challenges, including “ethnic discrimination, marginalisation, residential segregation, and socio-economic inequality,” which contribute to their persistent social exclusion and political underrepresentation (Zdeb & Vermeersch, 2024, p. 1).

Research on Roma education highlights the structural barriers faced by Roma children in accessing equal educational opportunities. Particularly those

related to language differences, culturally insensitive educational systems, and the evaluation of minority students within majority-language schooling environments (Kyuchukov, 2022).

Scholars have also emphasised the role of anti-Roma prejudice, often described as antiromism, in sustaining social exclusion. Anti-Romaism refers to specific forms of racism directed at Roma populations, which manifest through negative stereotypes, discrimination in public institutions, and limited representation in political and social life (McGarry, 2017). These cultural factors form an important background for understanding the social position of Roma women and the challenges they face in accessing education, employment, and public participation.

Intersectionality and the position of Roma women

While Roma communities as a whole experience significant isolation, the women of this community often face additional inequalities resulting from the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a framework for understanding how multiple social identities - such as gender, race, and class- intersect to produce interconnected and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination that shape individuals' lived experiences. This research argues that women facing multiple marginalisations are often overlooked in mainstream feminist movements, highlighting the need for intersectional approaches in advocacy and policy.

Applying an intersectional perspective to the experiences of Roma women reveals how multiple dimensions of disadvantage operate simultaneously. As Kóczé (2011) argues, Roma women frequently encounter overlapping forms of discrimination stemming from ethnic prejudice and gender inequality. These intersecting inequalities influence access to education, employment, and political participation, often placing Roma women at the margins of both majority society and their own communities. Research on Roma inclusion in Europe similarly emphasises that Roma communities frequently face structural barriers in accessing public institutions, labour markets, and political representation, reinforcing broader patterns of social exclusion (Vermeersch, 2006). Studies of Roma segregation in Eastern and Southeast Europe further highlight how socio-spatial inequalities, particularly those related to housing conditions, labour market exclusion, and access to education, continue to shape

the everyday experiences of Roma communities (Vincze, 2013). There, we can see how economic deprivation and social stigmatisation intersect to produce isolation outcomes.

Gender norms, empowerment, and decision-making

Within the wider context of marginalisation and gender inequality, sociological discussions of empowerment provide important insights into the factors shaping women's life choices. Empowerment is commonly understood as the process through which individuals who have previously been denied the ability to make strategic life choices gain greater control over decisions affecting their lives and access to resources (Kabeer, 2005). In this sense, disempowerment refers not only to the absence of resources or opportunities but also to the limitation of individuals' agency in making their own life decisions.

Empowerment is commonly understood as a process involving both internal and external dimensions. As Kabeer (2005) argues, it relates to individuals' capacity to make meaningful choices, which depends both on internal perceptions of agency and on access to resources and opportunities. In the context of Roma communities, these theoretical insights are particularly relevant for understanding how limited educational opportunities, economic insecurity, and strong gender expectations surrounding family roles may restrict women's autonomy.

While empowerment is often interpreted as achieving higher levels of social or political representation, for many Roma girls and women, it may begin at a more fundamental level: the ability to make decisions about their own education, marriage, and future. Access to education, economic resources, and participation in community life can therefore play an important role in expanding women's agency and challenging restrictive gender norms (Kabeer, 2005). Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing both the persistence of early marriage and the possibilities for social change within Roma communities.

Materials and method

This paper adopts a qualitative analytical case study approach, focusing on Montenegro as a specific socio-political context within the Western Balkans. Rather than conducting primary empirical research, the study is based on secondary data analysis, drawing on the review and interpretation of existing academic literature, policy documents, and statistical reports.

The analysis is guided by sociological concepts such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), empowerment, and social exclusion, which provide a theoretical framework for understanding the persistence of early and underage marriage within Roma communities. The selection of sources follows clearly defined criteria. Sources were included based on (1) their relevance to Roma inclusion and gender equality, (2) their focus on Montenegro or the Western Balkan region, and (3) their institutional credibility, including publications from international organisations, governmental bodies, and established civil society organisations.

The study primarily draws on reports produced by organisations such as UNICEF and UNDP, as well as statistical data from surveys including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by MONSTAT and UNICEF. In addition, qualitative and policy-oriented reports from civil society organisations working directly with Roma communities are used to complement statistical findings with contextual insights.

The temporal scope of the analysis focuses mainly on the period from 2010 to 2025, allowing for the examination of both recent developments and ongoing structural patterns, while earlier foundational studies are included where necessary to support the theoretical framework. By synthesising these sources, the paper provides a sociological interpretation of the structural and cultural factors influencing early marriage and the evolving role of Roma women in contemporary Montenegrin society.

Results: Current situation of Roma women in Montenegro

Roma and Egyptian communities represent one of the most socially and economically vulnerable populations in Montenegro. Although these two groups are often discussed together in policy and research as the “Roma and Egyptian” (RE) population due to their similar socio-economic conditions and historical marginalisation, they constitute distinct ethnic communities with

different historical origins and cultural identities³. Nevertheless, both groups experience comparable structural challenges related to poverty, discrimination, limited access to education and employment, and social exclusion (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021).

According to official census data from 2011, 6,251 individuals declared themselves as Roma (1.01% of the population), while 2,054 declared themselves as Egyptians (0.33%). However, international organisations estimate that the actual number of Roma and Egyptians living in Montenegro is considerably higher, reaching approximately 25,000 individuals (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights 2021). As per CeMI and CIN⁴, these communities are concentrated primarily in urban areas such as Podgorica, Berane, and Nikšić, often living in segregated or informal settlements with limited infrastructure and access to public services (CIN et al., 2022; Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021).

The discrepancy between official census data and estimates from international organisations also reflects broader difficulties in documentation and social visibility among Roma communities. In many cases, marginalised populations remain statistically underrepresented due to informal housing conditions, migration patterns, and limited institutional trust. As a result, the social challenges faced by Roma and Egyptian communities may be even more extensive than official statistics suggest.

Socio-economic indicators reveal a persistent structural imbalance affecting Roma and Egyptian communities. Research on Roma women across Europe similarly highlights patterns of exclusion in access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing, contributing to broader social isolation (Andrei et al.,

³Ashkali emerged as a distinct minority only after the Kosovo crisis, even though specialists in Romani studies had previously been aware of them. Before the conflict, these researchers typically described the Ashkali as Albanian-speaking Roma. Because they shared language and cultural similarities with Albanians, Ashkali communities often aligned themselves with the Albanian population depending on local circumstances (Zemon, 2010a). Balkan Egyptians are a minority living in the Western Balkans, identifying as a distinct ethnic group with their own historical narratives, cultural traditions, and community organisations. Historically described as a sedentary population engaged in crafts, agriculture, and urban trades, their identity has been shaped by centuries of misclassification with Roma communities in medieval and Ottoman sources (Zemon, 2010b).

⁴*CeMI* - Centar za Monitoring i Istraživanje (Centre for Monitoring and Research)

CIN- Centar za Istraživačko Novinarstvo (Centre for Investigative Journalism)

2015). Research conducted by CEDEM⁵ (2025) indicates that many Roma households continue to experience significant administrative and institutional barriers. For example, the share of Roma in informal settlements possessing citizenship certificates declined from 62.2% in 2023 to 26.4% in 2025 (CEDEM & Bešić, 2025). Among domiciled Roma, possession of valid identity cards also declined from 97.3% to 75.4% during the same period. The lack of personal documentation represents a serious obstacle to accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, employment, and social protection (CEDEM & Bešić, 2025).

These administrative barriers illustrate how social exclusion operates not only through economic disadvantage but also through institutional processes. Limited access to documentation can create a cycle of exclusion in which individuals are simultaneously disconnected from healthcare, education, employment opportunities, and legal protection. In this sense, bureaucratic isolation becomes an important mechanism through which broader social inequalities are reproduced.

Education represents one of the key areas in which social inequalities remain particularly visible. Although progress has been achieved in increasing school enrolment, educational attainment among Roma and Egyptian children remains profoundly lower compared to the majority population (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021). Data from the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians (2021-2025) indicate that approximately 1,793 Roma and Egyptian pupils attended primary school during the 2020/2021 school year, while only 174 students were enrolled in secondary education (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021). Pre-school participation has also improved modestly, increasing from approximately 12% in 2017 to 16% in 2020 (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021). Despite these improvements, early school dropout remains a persistent problem, often linked to poverty, limited parental education, and traditional gender expectations (CIN et al., 2022; UNICEF Serbia, 2017).

Educational inequality also carries important symbolic and social consequences. Schools function not only as institutions of formal learning but also as spaces of social integration and civic participation. When Roma girls

⁵CEDEM - Centar za Demokratiju i Ljudska Prava (Centre for Democracy and Human Rights)

leave education early, they may become increasingly isolated from opportunities for economic independence and involvement in wider social life.

These systemic disparities have particularly significant implications for Roma and Egyptian girls and women. Sociological research frequently emphasises that Roma women experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic situation (Kóczé, 2011). In practice, this means that Roma women often face barriers not only within the broader society but also within their own communities, where traditional gender roles may limit educational opportunities and participation in public life. Economic marginalisation further reinforces these patterns of inequality. Employment opportunities for Roma and Egyptian women remain limited, with many women excluded from formal labour markets due to low educational attainment and discrimination (CIN et al, 2022). According to data from the Employment Agency of Montenegro, 996 members of the Roma and Egyptian population were registered as unemployed in 2020, of whom more than half were women (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021). These figures illustrate the extent to which economic vulnerability continues to shape the life circumstances of Roma women.

Housing conditions also contribute to the reproduction of social exclusion. Many Roma settlements in Montenegro are characterised by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to utilities such as water and electricity (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021). Although various housing programmes have been implemented in recent years, including the construction of social housing units and the closure of large informal camps such as Konik in Podgorica, housing conditions remain a significant challenge for many families (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, 2021).

In addition to structural disadvantages, Roma communities continue to face widespread social prejudice and discrimination. Public opinion research conducted by the Centre for Civic Education indicates that Roma are frequently perceived as the most discriminated ethnic group in Montenegro (CGO, 2024). These attitudes contribute to persistent social distance and may reinforce existing barriers in areas such as employment, housing, and social participation (CGO, 2024). Within this overall context of social exclusion, the position of Roma and Egyptian girls and women is particularly complex. Media reports and field research highlight that Roma girls often encounter multiple forms of disadvantage related to poverty, discrimination, and

traditional expectations regarding marriage and family roles (RTCG & Kapa, 2024; UNICEF Serbia, 2017). These factors can heavily influence girls' educational trajectories and life opportunities.

Simultaneously, recent initiatives by civil society organisations and international institutions indicate emerging processes of social change within Roma communities. Projects implemented by Centre for Romani Initiatives, often with the support of international organisations such as UNDP and UN Women, have increasingly focused on empowering Roma women and addressing domestic violence and child arranged marriages (UNDP Eurasia & Knežević, 2023).

In response to these challenges, various initiatives by civil society organisations and international institutions have sought to improve the social position of Roma and Egyptian women. These initiatives also address issues such as gender-based violence and early marriage. More recent community-based activities implemented in 2025 have been addressing these issues through awareness campaigns and workshops. Local initiatives aim to strengthen cooperation between Roma communities and public institutions (CRI, 2025). These programmes emphasise education, community dialogue, and women's empowerment as key mechanisms for addressing harmful practices and improving the social position of Roma women.

Ultimately, these developments illustrate the complex and evolving situation of Roma and Egyptian women in Montenegro. While social inequities and alienation continue to shape everyday realities, increasing attention from civil society organisations, international institutions, and Roma activists themselves suggests the emergence of new opportunities for social change.

Results: Factors contributing to the victimisation of Roma girls in early marriage

Early and underage marriage represents one of the most significant social challenges affecting Roma and Egyptian girls in Montenegro. Although child marriage has declined globally in recent decades, research consistently shows that it remains more prevalent among socially marginalised communities. It is particularly in the places where poverty, limited educational opportunities, and traditional gender norms intersect. In the context of the Western Balkans, early marriage is primarily associated with Roma and Egyptian populations and is often referred to by society as a "public secret". Authorities attempt to enforce

the law regarding early marriage, but their efforts have met with limited success. Social disparities and expectations surrounding family life continue to impact the life trajectories of girls in these communities substantially.

From a sociological perspective, early marriage within marginalised communities cannot be reduced to a single causal factor or explained solely through cultural traditions. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of social imbalance, limited institutional support, and gendered expectations surrounding family life. In contexts characterised by persistent poverty and social exclusion, marriage may be perceived not only as a cultural norm but also as a strategy of social and economic security. This sheds light on the importance of analysing early marriage within the broader framework of structural marginalisation, rather than just treating it as an isolated cultural phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, survey data from the 2018 Montenegro Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by MONSTAT and UNICEF indicate that early marriage remains considerably more common in Roma settlements than in the general population. According to this survey, approximately 36% of Roma girls aged 15 to 19 were either married or living in a union, which is significantly higher than among the general population. More recent results indicate that around one in three Roma girls in the same age group (about 33%) are married or in a common-law union, confirming that early marriage continues to impact a substantial proportion of Roma adolescents in Montenegro (UNICEF Montenegro, 2025). Furthermore, around 60% of women aged 20 to 24 from Roma settlements reported getting married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024). The same research demonstrates a strong connection between education and early marriage: girls with limited or no education are significantly more likely to enter marriage before the age of eighteen (MONSTAT & UNICEF, 2019).

Research conducted in different global contexts consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between educational attainment and the timing of motherhood and marriage. Women with lower levels of education are statistically more likely to marry earlier. They are also more likely to experience early childbirth and face limited economic opportunities later in life (Marphatia et al., 2020; Kim, 2023). From a sociological perspective, education functions not only as a form of knowledge acquisition but also as a mechanism of social mobility, delayed family formation, and increased individual autonomy. Within socially marginalised communities, access to

stable education and employment is often restricted. In these situations, girls may face dramatically fewer opportunities to postpone marriage and pursue independent life perspectives. In the case of Roma women, these broader inequalities may become even more pronounced due to the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and poverty.

Coming back to underage marriage, more recent reports suggest that the practice continues to occur despite existing legal protections. Media reporting and monitoring by civil society organisations indicate that at least eleven cases of child arranged marriages were identified in 2024 within Roma and Egyptian communities in Montenegro. This includes cases involving very young adolescents. These cases were reported in several municipalities, including Podgorica, Nikšić, Berane, and Tivat, illustrating that the phenomenon is geographically widespread rather than limited to a single locality (24kroz7, 2024).

Sociological explanations of early marriage in Roma communities often emphasise the interaction of economic insecurity, educational barriers, and social expectations regarding gender roles. Poverty remains one of the most important structural factors influencing family decisions. In communities where unemployment rates are high and access to stable income is limited, early marriage may be perceived as a strategy for reducing household economic pressure or securing social stability for daughters. Research on Roma communities in Montenegro and the wider region suggests that economic vulnerability frequently shapes decisions about education, employment, and family formation (CIN et al., 2022).

Educational inequality represents another key factor contributing to the persistence of early marriage. Sociological approaches to education have long emphasised that unequal access to educational resources contributes to the reproduction of broader social inequalities and limits opportunities for social mobility (Pusztai, 2022). Although enrolment in primary education among Roma and Egyptian children has improved in recent years, dropout rates remain higher than among the majority population. When girls leave school early, their opportunities for employment and social participation become more limited, increasing the likelihood of early marriage. Regional research conducted by UNICEF on child marriage among Roma communities in Serbia similarly highlights the close relationship between low educational attainment and early marriage, demonstrating that girls with limited schooling are considerably more likely to enter early unions (UNICEF Serbia, 2017).

In addition to economic and educational factors, cultural norms and expectations surrounding family life also shape marriage practices. In some Roma communities, traditional expectations emphasise early family formation, female modesty and the importance of marriage as a marker of adulthood and social respectability. These norms may encourage families to arrange marriages for daughters at a relatively young age. This is true particularly in contexts where community reputation and family honour remain important inner social values.

Concurrently, it is important to avoid interpreting these practices through simplistic cultural explanations alone. Scholars of Roma marginalisation frequently warn against essentialising Roma communities by presenting early marriage as an inherent or uniform cultural characteristic. Instead, such practices should be understood within the broader context of long-term exclusion, economic insecurity, and historically limited access to institutional support (Kóczé, 2011; McGarry, 2017).

The consequences of early marriage for Roma girls are significant and long-lasting. Early marriage is frequently associated with the interruption of education, early motherhood, and economic dependency, which together limit women's opportunities for social mobility. Girls who marry during adolescence often leave school permanently, reducing their chances of accessing stable employment later in life. These patterns, through a snowball effect, contribute to the perpetuation of poverty and alienation across generations.

Despite these challenges, recent initiatives suggest that awareness of the issue is gradually increasing within both Roma communities and broader Montenegrin society. Civil society organisations and international institutions have increasingly focused on addressing child marriage through community-based programmes, education initiatives, and legal awareness campaigns. One notable initiative implemented between 2021 and 2023 provided support to approximately 800 Roma and Egyptian women in six municipalities in Montenegro, focusing on the prevention of domestic violence and child arranged marriages. The project involved local mediators, educational workshops, and cooperation with institutions responsible for social protection and law enforcement (UNDP Eurasia & Knežević 2023).

Civil society organisations have also played an important role in raising awareness about early marriage and gender-based violence. The Centre for Romani Initiatives has organised numerous workshops and community

sessions addressing domestic violence and child arranged marriages in several municipalities, including Podgorica, Berane, Bijelo Polje, and Nikšić. These activities aim to inform Roma women and community members about legal protection mechanisms, encourage reporting of abuse, and promote the importance of girls' education (CRI⁶, 2025).

Collectively, these professions indicate that early marriage remains a persistent but increasingly contested issue within some Roma and Egyptian communities in Montenegro. While social irregularities and communal seclusion continue to create conditions in which early marriage occurs, there is a growing involvement from civil society organisations and educational initiatives. Additionally, Roma women activists suggest a gradual social transformation. These processes illustrate that change within marginalised groups is often complex and incremental. It is shaped not only through formal policy interventions but also through shifts in community attitudes, educational participation, and women's agency.

Legal and policy context

The legal and policy framework in Montenegro formally provides strong protection against early and forced marriage. According to the Family Law of Montenegro, the minimum legal age for marriage is set at 18 years, with the possibility of marriage at the age of 16 only under exceptional circumstances and with court approval (Službeni list Crne Gore, 2007⁷). In addition, the Criminal Code of Montenegro criminalises forced marriage and recognises it as a violation of fundamental human rights, particularly in cases involving coercion, exploitation, or abuse (Montenegro Ministry of Justice, 2023).

Montenegro is also bound by several international legal instruments that address child marriage and gender-based violence. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). Both frameworks emphasise the obligation of states to prevent early and forced marriages, protect victims, and promote gender equality through legal and policy measures.

⁶CRI - Centre for Romani Initiatives

⁷Translation: Official Gazette of Montenegro 2007

At the national level, the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025 represents the main policy framework addressing the social position of Roma and Egyptian communities in Montenegro. The strategy identifies education, employment, housing, and healthcare as key areas requiring intervention, while also recognising the importance of addressing gender inequality and harmful social practices, including early marriage (Government of Montenegro, 2022).

Despite the existence of this relatively comprehensive legal and policy framework, the implementation of these measures remains uneven in practice. One of the main challenges lies in the fact that many early marriages within the Roma and Egyptian communities are conducted informally, outside of official registration systems. In addition, broader social norms that prioritise non-intervention in private and family matters may discourage reporting and limit the involvement of state institutions. As a result, these unions often remain invisible to state institutions and are not subject to legal oversight or protection mechanisms.

Furthermore, limited institutional trust, administrative barriers, and social isolation may discourage reporting of early or forced marriages. Research and field reports indicate that Roma women and girls may face difficulties accessing legal protection, social services, and law enforcement mechanisms, particularly in cases involving family or community pressure (CIN et al., 2022; CEDEM & Bešić, 2025). This gap between formal legal standards and everyday practice highlights the limitations of relying solely on legislative measures to address complex social issues.

Another important limitation relates to the level of community involvement in policy implementation. As noted in research on Roma inclusion in the Western Balkans, policies are often designed in a hierarchical approach with limited participation of Roma communities themselves. This may reduce their effectiveness, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as early marriage, which are closely linked to social norms, economic conditions, and community structures.

These challenges suggest that while the legal framework in Montenegro formally aligns with international standards, its effectiveness depends on the extent to which it is supported by community-based approaches and education initiatives. Additionally, mechanisms that empower Roma women and girls are essential for enhancing this effectiveness. Addressing early marriage, therefore, requires not only legal prohibition but also broader social

interventions that take into account the structural and cultural factors shaping the lives of Roma communities.

Emerging social change: Roma women as agents of transformation

While Roma and Egyptian women in Montenegro continue to face significant structural and social challenges, recent developments indicate emerging processes of social change within these communities. Increasingly, Roma women are not only subjects of social exclusion but are also becoming active participants in transforming the conditions that shape their lives. These processes of change are closely linked to access to education, community-based initiatives, and growing participation in public and social life.

Civil society organisations have played a crucial role in supporting these transformations. Initiatives implemented by organisations such as the Centre for Romani Initiatives, often in cooperation with international partners, have focused on raising awareness about early and underage marriage, domestic violence, and women's rights. Through workshops, community sessions, and direct engagement with women and families, these programmes contribute to increasing legal awareness. They also strengthen women's capacity to recognise and challenge harmful practices (CRI, 2025). Such initiatives are particularly important in contexts where formal institutional mechanisms may be limited or insufficiently accessible. Community-based approaches allow for more culturally sensitive engagement and create spaces in which Roma women can discuss their experiences, share knowledge, and support one another. In this sense, empowerment is not only an individual process but also a collective one, shaped through social interaction and community participation.

From a sociological perspective, these innovations can be understood through the framework of empowerment and agency. As Kabeer (2005) argues, empowerment involves the ability to make meaningful choices in contexts where such choices were previously denied. In the case of Roma women, this may include decisions related to education, employment, and marriage. Importantly, empowerment in this context does not necessarily imply immediate access to positions of power or formal authority, but rather the gradual expansion of autonomy and the ability to influence one's own life trajectory.

Educational participation represents one of the most significant drivers of these changes. As increasing numbers of Roma girls remain in school for

longer periods, their opportunities for social mobility and economic independence expand. Education not only provides practical skills but also contributes to changing aspirations, expectations, and perceptions of gender roles. Girls who remain in education are more likely to delay marriage and challenge traditional expectations surrounding early family formation (UNICEF Serbia, 2017; MONSTAT & UNICEF, 2019).

In addition to education, economic empowerment plays an important role in reshaping gender relations. Programmes that support women's access to employment, vocational training, and income-generating activities can reduce economic dependency and strengthen women's bargaining power within households and communities (Kabeer, 2005). In simpler terms, helping Roma women become self-sufficient by providing opportunities to earn their own income, rather than relying on voluntary or community-given money, is a crucial factor in achieving independence and empowerment. This aligns with broader sociological findings that link access to resources with increased decision-making capacity and autonomy. In parallel, these processes of change should not be understood as linear or uniform. Transformations in gender roles and social norms often occur gradually and may involve tensions between traditional expectations and emerging forms of social participation. Roma women who pursue education or employment may face resistance within their communities, as well as discrimination in the wider society (Kóczé, 2011). This highlights the importance of addressing both external and internal dimensions of inequality when analysing social change.

Nevertheless, the growing visibility of Roma women in community initiatives, educational settings, and public life suggests the emergence of new forms of agency and leadership. Women who participate in awareness campaigns, educational programmes, or local activism often become role models for younger generations, helping diffuse new norms and expectations. In this way, individual experiences of empowerment can have broader collective effects, influencing community attitudes toward education, gender roles, and early marriage.

These advancements indicate that Roma women are increasingly positioned not only as beneficiaries of social policies but as active agents of transformation within their communities. Their participation in education, community initiatives, and public life challenges traditional patterns of exclusion and contributes to gradual but meaningful social change. Understanding these processes is essential for developing policies and

interventions that not only address structural disparities but also support and strengthen the agency of Roma women themselves.

Proposals: Policy recommendations

Addressing early and underage marriage among Roma and Egyptian communities in Montenegro requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal enforcement, education, and community-based interventions. While the existing legal framework formally prohibits child marriage, the findings of this study indicate that societal injustice, norms, and limited institutional engagement continue to shape the persistence of this practice. The following recommendations aim to address these interconnected challenges.

First, it is essential to strengthen the implementation of existing legal protections. Although Montenegro has established a legal framework that prohibits early and forced marriage, greater efforts are needed to ensure that these laws are effectively applied in practice. This includes improving coordination between social services, educational institutions, and law enforcement bodies, as well as developing mechanisms for early identification and reporting of informal or unregistered marriages.

Second, expanding access to education for Roma and Egyptian girls should remain a central policy priority. As demonstrated in previous sections, education plays a crucial role in delaying marriage and increasing life opportunities. Policies should therefore focus not only on school enrolment but also on retention, particularly at the secondary level. This should include providing financial support, transportation, mentorship programmes, and the involvement of community mediators who can work directly with families to encourage continued education.

Third, community-based initiatives should be further developed and supported. Programmes implemented by organisations such as the Centre for Romani Initiatives demonstrate the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that engage directly with Roma communities. Expanding such initiatives can help raise awareness about the consequences of early marriage, promote legal literacy, and create safe spaces for women and girls to discuss their experiences and seek support.

Fourth, policies should place greater emphasis on the economic empowerment of Roma women. Access to vocational training and employment opportunities can reduce economic dependency and increase women's

capacity to make decisions about their own lives. Economic empowerment is closely linked to broader processes of social inclusion and plays a key role in challenging traditional gender roles.

Finally, it is crucial to ensure the active participation of Roma women in policy design and implementation. Including Roma women in decision-making processes at the local and national levels can improve the relevance and effectiveness of policies, while also recognising them as key actors in promoting social change within their communities.

These recommendations highlight the need for a multidimensional approach that combines legal, educational, economic, and community-based strategies. Addressing early no marriage is not only a matter of legal regulation but also of transforming the social conditions that shape the lives of Roma and Egyptian women and girls in Montenegro.

Summary

This paper has examined the evolving role of Roma women in contemporary Montenegrin society, with a particular focus on the persistence of early and underage marriage and its broader sociological implications. By analysing existing research, policy frameworks, and recent initiatives, the study has underlined the complex interplay between structural marginalisation and gender norms. It also addresses the limited access to education and economic opportunities that continue to shape the lives of Roma and Egyptian women.

The findings indicate that early marriage cannot be understood solely as a cultural practice, but rather as a phenomenon embedded within wider patterns of social exclusion and inequality. Despite the comprehensive legal and policy framework, the gap between formal regulations and everyday practice remains significant. Significance is evident particularly in contexts where informal unions, limited institutional trust, and social norms discourage intervention. At the same time, education and economic conditions play a crucial role in influencing life paths, reinforcing the importance of structural factors in shaping individual choices.

Importantly, the paper has also demonstrated that Roma women are not merely passive subjects of these conditions. Increasing participation in education, community initiatives, and local activism points to emerging forms of agency and transformation within Roma communities. Through both individual and collective efforts, Roma women are contributing to gradual

changes in gender norms, social expectations, and attitudes toward early marriage.

Despite the existence of national strategies and EU-supported initiatives aimed at improving Roma inclusion, it can be said that their effectiveness remains limited. This can be attributed to several interrelated factors, including weak implementation mechanisms, insufficient coordination between institutions, and a lack of trust between Roma communities and state authorities. In addition, policies often fail to adequately address the intersection of poverty, gender inequality, and ethnic marginalisation, resulting in fragmented interventions that do not fully reach the most vulnerable groups.

These findings suggest that addressing early marriage requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond legal prohibition and focuses on education, economic empowerment, and community engagement. Future policy efforts should prioritise culturally sensitive interventions, strengthen cooperation with Roma communities, and improve access to education and employment opportunities for Roma girls and women. At the EU and national levels, greater emphasis should be placed on the effective implementation of existing policies, alongside continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

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