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Early marriage in Roma communities in Ukraine: cultural and socioeconomic factors

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This paper analyses the situation with regard to early marriage in Ukrainian society generally and in Roma communities particularly, while highlighting the importance of gender-based analysis in Roma studies. Empirical studies provide a focus on the cultural and socio-economic factors relevant to a discussion of the situation of Roma women in Ukraine who marry early, especially the sense of conflict they feel between traditional culture and modern society as they relate their experience of marriage.

Keywords: early marriage, child marriage, gender, Roma communities, Roma women, Ukraine

Introduction

“My father gave me in marriage. I was not asked if I wanted to or not” (Roma woman, Volyn’, Interviewee 1, 2013). This is the beginning of the story of a female Roma child-spouse who was married at the age of 14. Currently she has three children and no secondary education or job. She begs on the streets together with other Roma women, some of whom are pregnant or already have a number of kids. This story looks rather “exotic” for mainstream Ukrainian society. Moreover, such stories could even increase the level of “romophobia” that is already comparably high (KIIS 2010). Alexandra Oprea (2005) stresses the (post-)colonial notions in the European debates on the early marriage practices of some Roma communities: “In contrast to the authentic Romani support for barbaric practices, white politicians have represented the civilised, non-sexist West as striving to bring this backward minority into the modern age”.

This article contributes to Roma studies by using gender-based analysis of such social problems as early or child marriage (an area where gender intersects ethnicity). In the literature on Roma issues in Europe and Ukraine, early marriage

problems are either ignored or not analyzed sufficiently. There is a lack of studies of the stability of early marriage patterns. To help fill this research gap, this article explains the situation of early marriage via a broader analysis of Roma communities' problems.

The main argument of this article is that early marriage may be a good example for how to explain so-called "cultural" problems also by reference to socioeconomic ones. Marginal groups that have a shortage of resources try to use alternative ones, and marriage could be perceived an "appropriate" survival strategy for such groups. Roma women encounter a double marginalization, as both gender and ethnic minorities (Corsi 2008; Durst 2002; Hale Reed 2013; Magyari-Vincze 2006; Oprea 2005; Written comments 2010). Moreover, being in conditions of poverty, lack of education (also sex education), Roma women face socioeconomic problems (Ringold 2005; Roma people 2012; Written comments 2010).

Roma communities in Ukraine are not homogeneous, and differ by socioeconomic status and level of education. I believe that this is an important factor guiding the perceptions of, and the practice of early marriage. This paper attempts to discover the factors that contribute to an explanation of early marriage in Ukraine, especially among economically marginalized Roma communities. It starts by highlighting the importance of gender-based analysis in Roma studies. I also critique the discourses of international human rights policies towards women and children and their implications for Ukraine on the issue of marriage. Moreover, the situation with regard to early marriage is analyzed with reference to Ukrainian society in general and Roma communities particularly.

Methodology and Data

In this paper phenomenon of early (or child) marriage in Ukraine is analyzed with particular attention to marginal Roma communities. The analysis below relies on original data collected as a part of a research on early marriage in Ukraine (with specific attention to the Roma population) commissioned and financed by the United Nations Population Fund.

The study is based on a review of available information about legal (laws on women's and children's rights) and institutional frameworks and policies on early marriage, including a brief overview of relevant international standards. Primary data

from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine is analyzed; secondary data from different sociological institutions (e.g. the Kharkiv Institute for Social Research, Kiev International Institute of Sociology) is used.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in October-November 2013 in different parts of Ukraine: Kyiv, Kharkiv and Volyn' oblast (northwest Ukraine). It included 10 semi-structured interviews with persons (girls and boys) in early marriages from both the non-Roma population and Roma¹ communities; and, four focus groups each from the non-Roma and Roma populations (comprising both female and male child-spouses and middle-aged and older community members). Because the general topic of research targeted the Ukrainian population in general and the Roma minority particularly, members of both were interviewed. Moreover, 10 interviews with experts in the fields of children's and women's rights, civil society and academia were conducted. All interviewees were anonymized. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative content-analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts.

Roma women in Roma studies: making gender a visible category

The “Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–15” initiative (promoted by Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia) has called greater attention to Roma issues. It is an “unprecedented political commitment by European governments to eliminate discrimination against Roma and close the unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society” (Decade 2005). Priority areas of this program are not only education, employment, health, and housing, poverty and discrimination, but also *gender mainstreaming* as one of the mechanisms to achieve equality and justice. Though formally recognized on the policy level, *gender-based analysis* is not always applied in Roma studies.

At the same time, scholars stress the *diversity* of the Roma population — ethnic, occupational, religious, and economic (Ringold 2005). Gender is one of the significant factors in the heterogeneity of Roma communities. While in some studies the importance of mainstream education to improve the literacy of the Roma people is definitely recognized (Smith 1997: 244), others stress the gender-specific role of

¹ In this article, adjective *Roma* is used with regard to women. I refer to the Council of Europe Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues (2012), where it is proposed that in English both “Roma” and “Romani” be used as adjectives: a “Roma(ni) woman”, “Roma(ni) communities”. However, it is recommended that “Romani” be restricted to the language and culture: “Romani language”, “Romani culture”.

education in Roma women's empowerment: "Education, starting from early childhood, is crucial to addressing and overcoming some of the negative practices that continue to affect Roma girls in a number of Roma communities, such as early marriage and pregnancy" (ODIHR 2013: 12).

Roma women's public voice is silenced under government's identity politics and social inclusion policies (Vincze 2014: 446). That is, the problems Roma women face are not always recognized (for example by politicians and NGO activists) as particularly women's rights problems, but rather as "community traditions": "[the problems] faced by Roma women are interpreted as a cultural particularity of the Roma community and not as problems in themselves, ... Roma women are subsumed within the larger ethnic group and ... treated by state authorities ... as ... belonging to a community with different norms and not as women with equal rights" (Ilisei 2012: 72).

There are challenges in discussing the internal community problems commonly associated with European societies' "romophobia" (Oprea 2004: 38): "One fears that discussing domestic violence publicly in the racist society one inhabits will result in reinforcing [the] negative stereotypes [held] of men of colour [*sic*], but not discussing it allows racism to impede progress by not allowing communities of colour to tackle certain internal problems". Scholars also argue over the challenges that Roma women, as other marginalized groups of women, can face when trying to raise the question of internal community problems, for example, gender-based violence, early marriage, or reproductive rights. (Crenshaw 1995; Oprea 2004).

Feminist researchers pay special attention to Roma women, whose position is at the intersection of racism, poverty and sexism. The Romanian Romani activist and scholar Alexandra Oprea writes (2004: 33): "Race, class, and gender dynamics place Romani women in a precarious position, the consequences of which are often early marriage, lack of access to decent labour, healthcare, and education, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence... The ubiquitous exclusion produced by racism, sexism and poverty often leave Romani women with little access to the political sphere".

In a number of studies Roma women's reproductive health issues are analyzed. It is often pointed out that they tend to experience greater health risks than non-Roma women, which is due to early and multiple pregnancies, poor housing, heavy workload at home, etc. In some countries (such as Slovakia and Hungary) cases

of imposed sterilization of young Roma women have been reported (Corsi 2008: 11). In general, Roma women from lower socioeconomic classes are not registered with a family physician and fail to go through prenatal check-ups. These women's greater health risks stem from poor reproductive health, including high numbers of closely spaced births, inadequate prenatal care, and poor nutrition (Ringold 2000: 8). Moreover, Roma women make decisions regarding reproduction not only according to their own views and feelings, but also conforming to the social expectations that they would like to live up to as wives and mothers (Magyari-Vincze 2006: 34).

Roma women also face traditional (patriarchal) cultures that may legitimize multiple forms of discrimination: "The mistreatment of Romani communities as a cultural group [is tolerated] by the majority population, [which invokes] 'culture' and 'cultural difference' to legitimate discrimination and negative prejudices against Roma (women) as if these were 'natural' consequences and not structural causes of Roma life circumstances" (Magyari-Vincze 2006: 59). A notable example is the double standard towards sexual behavior that prevails in Roma communities. Studies reveal (Kelly 2004) that men have more sexual freedom before and during marriage, engage in a wide range of unprotected practices with primary and multiple outside partners, and have more power and control. In contrast, women are expected to maintain virginity before marriage and thereafter remain their husbands' exclusive sexual partners.

All the above-mentioned examples of Roma women's socioeconomic problems support the *gender category* as a significant variable of our analysis showing the heterogeneity of Roma communities. The phenomenon of early marriage should be analyzed via so-called "gender lenses" that affect girls and boys in different ways. This will be described further below.

Early marriage in the international human rights discourse

General studies on early marriage (Durst 2002; Hale 2013; Kelly 2004) explain it as a function of culture and describe the harm early marriage [can] cause girls and women. In addition, particular attention is paid to the discourse of international human rights protection. International organizations believe that child marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights because, first of all, the definition of early (or child marriage) is the union, whether official or not, of two persons, at least one of whom is

under 18 years of age (UNICEF data). A child is “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (UNCRC 1989). Child spouses are considered incapable of giving full consent, so that early marriage is perceived as a violation of human rights and the rights of the child.

Various international treaties, conventions, and legislative documents address the early marriage issue: the Convention on Consent to Marriage, the Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962); the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (which followed the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women). These international instruments cover the abolition of harmful customs and traditions, violence against the girl child, marriage consent, marriageable age, registration of marriage, and the freedom to choose a spouse.

Child marriage is a gendered phenomenon that affects girls and boys in different ways. Overall, the number of boys in child marriages around the world is significantly lower than the number of girls. For example, a comparison of the proportion of young women aged 15–19 married in 2003 to that of young men of the same age group married in the same year was 72 to 1 in Mali and 8 to 1 in the US (Girls not brides). Moreover, according to statistics provided by the “Girls not brides” global campaign, “every year, an estimated 14 million girls aged under 18 are married worldwide with little or no say in the matter. In the developing world, one in seven girls is married before her 15th birthday and some child brides are as young as eight or nine”. Different reports provide very “scary figures” to underline a problem that is very often associated with “non-Western” societies (i.e. less developed in socioeconomic aspects).

In international human rights discourse in general, and children’s or women’s rights particularly, female child-spouses are perceived as *victims of “traditions”*. For example, they can be considered *vulnerable* to sexual abuse and domestic violence within relationships that are unequal. If they become pregnant, they often experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as their bodies are not ready for childbearing. On marrying, both boys and girls often have to leave the educational system in order to enter the workforce or take up domestic responsibilities at home.

There could be economic factors: data from 47 countries show that, overall, the median age at first marriage is gradually increasing; this improvement has been limited primarily to girls of families with higher incomes (Progress for children 2010: 46). Cultural arguments sometimes dominate the debate too much. The politics of human rights has focused predominantly on cultural minority rights; these have not yet been articulated in terms of the socioeconomic rights addressing the structural causes of exclusion (Vincze 2014: 444). Some scholars for example conclude that EU policies depoliticize poverty and do not address it as the result of advanced marginality (Vincze 2014: 445).

Countries like Ukraine that are eager to demonstrate more “European” or Western integration tendencies apply the international human rights discourse very often only *officially* (*de jure* but not *de facto*), as in “there is a lack of political will to advance gender transformations” (Ukraine 2014: 9) and not *critically*. As a result, legal mechanisms may not be applied to certain problems, which I will try to show by analyzing the early marriage issue in Ukraine.

Child marriage in Ukraine: legal discourse vs practice

Formally, Ukraine has ratified major international legislation and implemented corresponding national laws in order to fulfill the expectations of the international community on gender-based issues (among which also early marriage). It ratified both the “Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW) and the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (CRC), as well as other main international agreements on human rights. Women’s and children’s rights are protected under major national laws: The Constitution of Ukraine, the Family Code, the Code of Laws on Labour, and the Code of Criminal Procedure. Laws specifically addressing women’s and children’s rights include “On the Protection of Childhood” (2001), “On the Prevention of Family Violence” (2001), “On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men” (2005), and “On the Prevention and Combating of Discrimination in Ukraine” (2012). In 2011 the “Ombudsman for Children” was established to protect children’s rights (by Decree of the President of Ukraine). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child observed in 2011 that “the principle of non-discrimination with respect to children with disabilities, children of minority groups (especially Roma children), children in street situations, children

living with HIV/AIDS and asylum-seeking and refugee children, is not fully implemented in practice” (Concluding observations 2011: 6). This means that Roma children have been pointed out as one of the *vulnerable groups* to be specifically protected by existing laws and policies.

In Ukraine family relations are regulated, first of all, by the Constitution and the Family Code. The Constitution emphasizes that marriage is based on the free consent of a man and a woman and that each of the spouses has the same rights and obligations in marriage and the family (Constitution of Ukraine 1996: Article 51). The Family Code and the law “On state registration of acts of civil status” (2010) require a marriage to be registered at a State civil registry office, and both future spouses must present a Ukrainian or other national passport. Religious marriages and cohabiting couples have no legal status. Thus, Roma minority marriages that do not fit into that legal framework cannot be recognized by state.

Meanwhile Ukraine has tried to follow international human rights regulations and implement them. For example, on recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Concluding observations 2011: 5) and the CEDAW Committee (2010), in 2012 the Family Code of Ukraine was amended to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls from 17 to 18. The minimum age for boys was already set at 18. However, the Family Code of Ukraine permits a court to grant permission to a person 16 years or older to marry if it is established that the marriage is in her or his interests (Family Code of Ukraine 2002: Article 23). In practice, there are two main reasons why children under 18 are given court permission to marry: pregnancy and religious beliefs.

At the same time, early marriage is a disputed area between practice and legal system theory, both domestically and internationally (Romani C.R.I.S.S. 2010: 39). Experts who were interviewed for this study felt that the rather good legal framework (particularly on women’s and children’s rights issues) is not effectively implemented: *“I think Ukraine ... besides [on] particular issues ... overall has well-established legislation ... however, the implementation is the bigger problem than just having the legislation”* (International NGO employee, Interviewee 2, 2013).

In many countries, marriage before the age of 18 is still common among women (Population facts 2011). Of course, social practices regarding early marriage were established long before the legal regulation of matrimonial relationships. The state tries to control its citizens via the institution of marriage, as diverse feminist

literature and leftist critics of marriage say (Spade & Willse 2013). It regulates marriage policies through laws, and though international marriage discourse is taken for granted, there are no profound local debates over it.

Early marriage is also perceived as a “social problem” by international NGOs. When we look at general Ukrainian statistics, the situation does not seem critical. First of all, the prevalence of adolescent marriage in Ukraine among women has significantly decreased since the 1970s. According to UN World Marriage Data (2008), in Ukraine among women ever married aged 15–19, in 1979 there were 16.1% women and 2.3% men, in 1989—15.4% women and 2.7% men. By 1999 the percentage of women married at age 15–19 had decreased by 10% and by 2007—by 6.6%.

Secondly, primary and secondary data analysis demonstrates that in the general Ukrainian population, early marriage is closely correlated with *early sexual debut* and *unplanned pregnancy*. Experts approach the early marriage issue via the reproductive health problem that is also connected with sex education: “*It is an issue of reproductive health. A girl of 14, her body [cannot] be ready to manage pregnancy ... There is data [showing] that those women are [at] risk. It is not only [a] criminal issue. It is also an issue of educating about risks*” (International NGO employee, Interviewee 2, 2013). Ukraine has launched a state program “Reproductive Health of the Nation 2015”, which aims to create conditions for safe motherhood, provide instruction in reproductive health for children and young people, improve family planning and maintain the reproductive health of the population. However, inadequate funding complicates implementation and impairs essential progress, particularly in small towns and villages where poor infrastructure significantly limits access to health services (CRC 2008: 7). Physical access to health services in Ukraine is strongly associated with the poor infrastructure development of rural areas.

Under the Civil Code of Ukraine (Article 284), adolescents over age 14 can access reproductive health services and request the termination of a pregnancy without the consent of their parents or legal representatives. In the survey “Youth of Ukraine”, 61% of respondents who had had sexual intercourse had used some form of contraception; however, a fair number of these mentioned using withdrawal and rhythm methods (15% and 10%, respectively) rather than modern forms of contraception (Youth and Youth Policy in Ukraine 2010: 119). Limitations on the access to contraceptives for adolescents include being financially dependent on

parents, lack of a friendly and welcoming attitude towards teenagers in clinics, and the failure of medical staff to respect adolescents' privacy (Yarmanova 2012: 98). Early marriage and motherhood are connected with early sexual intercourse. In a survey of public opinion (carried out in February 2013), 7% of respondents reported that they had first had sexual intercourse between the ages of 12 and 15, and 42%, between the ages of 16 and 18 (KIIS 2013). There is no standard course or approved curriculum on sex education in Ukrainian schools. Some aspects of sex education (HIV/AIDS prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, gender relations between boys and girls) are studied in the eighth grade at secondary school, in the course "Fundamentals of Health". But it is left up to the teacher to decide which issues to focus on during course and how to approach them.

Early marriages in general in Ukraine are more typical of women than men. Data for 2012 from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (see Table 1) demonstrate that, in the age group 16–18, the number of women who married exceeded the number of men seven times. Gender-based stereotypes, common in the society (Ukraine 2014: 10), say it is important for Ukrainian women to be married (UNDP 2007). That is why some young people themselves, and young women in particular, support the idea of marrying early. As noted by UNICEF Ukraine, young married or cohabiting girls may get pregnant while they are still teenagers, drop out of school, do not obtain higher education, cannot get a job, and often find themselves isolated from the outside world. Moreover, child spouses face a lack of financial independence. Many are reliant on parents and cannot afford to live independently.

The legal discourse on marriage in Ukraine thus follows major international standards (with for example marriage age for both men and women at age 18). At the same time not enough effort is made to prevent early pregnancies or implement sex education. Early marriages among the Roma minority in Ukraine are perceived by the international community as a social problem, but also because they cannot, by law, be recognized by state. This means that the problem of early marriage practice in Roma communities is not only not solved, but also stigmatized as a legally forbidden practice that increases the marginalization of Roma communities in Ukraine.

What are the particularities surrounding early marriage for Roma communities in Ukraine? To understand this better, this article first overviews briefly the hardships experienced by the Roma minority in Ukrainian society.

The Roma minority in Ukraine: general overview

The Ukrainian authorities do not have reliable statistics on the Roma population, mainly because some Roma don't possess identity documents. At the last (2001) census, there were around 48 000 Roma people living in Ukraine. However, the Council of Europe's Roma and Travellers Division gives a number from 120 to 400 thousand Roma (EU Framework 2011: 18). A major problem in this regard is passport issuance. Information received by the "Chirikli" Women's Fund from sociomedical mediators in Roma community projects indicates that 40% of Roma persons don't have documents (birth certificate and passports). As Roma say, *"it is too complicated and mainly dangerous"*. They fear the militia (police), the necessity of registering at a military commissariat and the cost of accommodations, among other things. (Study of legal problems 2012: 9).

In the minds of most ordinary Ukrainian citizens there is a strong stereotype of the Roma as an asocial group. The Kiev International Institute of Sociology's yearly monitoring of ethnic prejudices in the Ukrainian population since 1994 shows that the most negative attitudes in Ukrainian society are expressed towards Roma people: 71% of Ukrainians don't want to consider Roma people as citizens of Ukraine (Level of extremist orientations 2010; Paniotto 2008).

Ukrainian Roma communities face regular and systematic discrimination in most areas including access to education, housing services, health care, employment and social services (Roma people 2012; Romani Children 2008; Study of legal problems 2012; Written comments 2010). European Roma Rights Centre research shows most Roma children either graduate illiterate or leave school at an early stage (Romani Children 2008). Generally there is in Roma communities a low level of formal education (in particular among women), a high level of unemployment, deplorable living conditions and poor health status. The Roma girls' rate of school attendance is lower than average, and their dropout rate, significantly higher (Ukraine 2014: 20). In segregated schools with majority of Roma children the level of teaching is much lower. Another recent study by the European Roma Rights Centre in the Odessa region shows that after 5 or 6 years of education in such schools some children do not even learn the basics of literacy (how to write their names or learn to count).

Also the discrimination against Roma by medical professionals affects the access of Roma women to adequate health care. A majority of Roma women interviewed for the Alternative CEDAW Report said they faced discrimination and degrading treatment by doctors and other hospital staff, and in some cases in the outright denial of health care treatment (Written comments 2010).

Early marriage among Roma people: social and economic factors

The social and economic factors that perpetuate child marriage are interconnected. Economic hardship may encourage families to marry off their daughters early rather than send them to school, and social norms may support the view that education is less important for girls than boys. In developing countries girls from the poorest households are three times more likely to get married before age 18 than girls from the richest households, and disparities across wealth quintiles exist in all regions (Progress for children 2010: 47). As this study and other reports show, early school dropout is linked to child marriage among Roma in some cases. It is important to note, however, that Roma girls face other barriers to education rooted in poverty, less expectation in the community for Roma girls to complete an education, and discrimination within the educational system—particularly the practice of segregated schooling for Roma children. As one NGO activist related the story of a Roma woman, *“When I fell in love, I was 15 or 16 years old. I studied at regular school and left it. It was a shame for me—to be pregnant and visit school. That is why I left”* (NGO activist, Interviewee 3, 2013).

Many poor Roma families take their girls out of school so that they can work or look after younger siblings while parents work (Written comments 2010). Another Roma NGO activist relates that boys are often able to continue with education if they want to (Roma NGO activist, Interviewee 4, 2013). She explains there is an expectation in many Roma families that girls more than boys should bear responsibility for helping out at home, which has a negative impact on school completion rates. The exclusion of Romani girls from school in Ukraine can be seen as another effect of early marriage among Roma families of low socioeconomic level.

Still, the female Roma respondents interviewed for my study value education for their children and therefore take them to school. As one illiterate Roma woman, 21 years old and mother of 3 children told me: *“I want my children at least to be*

educated. My father and mother never allowed me to go to school" (Interviewee 5, 2013). Overall, women with little education are more likely to get married as children, even in countries where the prevalence of child marriage is low (Progress for children 2010: 47).

Roma women more often than Roma men register to receive documents in order to get benefits from the state. Research on Roma communities shows that 84% of females, but only 16% of males get social help from the state. Moreover women after childbirth usually register as single mothers in order to get thereby additional payments from the state. Almost all Roma interviewed in the survey who get social aid from the state are single mothers, many with multiple children (Study of legal problems 2012: 10).

On the one hand, generous state support encourages women to solve the issue of documents and register their children, as two expert mention: *"In 2001, in Transcarpathia lived 14 000 Roma, at present 44 000 according to teachers, doctors [and] social services. The Transcarpathian Regional State Administration, referring [to] this number, [says that] half of [this] population [are] children, caused by the boom associated with benefits for children"* (International NGO employee, Interviewee 6, 2013). *"A lot of women ... contrary to men, receive state support ... They are mainly single mothers with 3 [or] more children"* (researcher of Roma issues, Interviewee 7, 2013). On the other hand, [other] Roma NGO activists criticize the perception of Roma children as, first of all, tools used to abuse state support: *"I'm sorry that this is happening. I'm trying to say that they do not give birth just in order to receive the money. The situation is such that it is the only means of existence of the family"* (Roma NGO activist, Interviewee 8, 2013). The female Roma respondents in their interviews also constantly mentioned that fact that they love their children and wish them "a better life".

The interviewed Roma people from poor communities believe that providing employment first of all for Roma women and men could reduce their poverty: *"What help do Gypsies need? The older generation should have jobs, [their] kids would see [it] ... [and this] could stop [the] begging. They are [just] used to it... they don't care, they are [so] used to begging. This is [an] illness... a lifestyle. They need something to do... jobs"* (Roma child-spouse who begs, Interviewee 1). Roma men also stress the importance of legal employment for reducing their poverty: *"I would like to have job. [The] possibility to earn money, in order for my wife not [to have to] beg. For*

example, to [be able to] graze cows. Or to be [a] construction [worker]. I tried to find [something, without] any result. [So] I go to [a] scrap heap and search for metal" (Interviewee 9, 2013). Indeed employment is an important indicator for the mechanism of "othering", i.e. making the distinction between the "useful, i.e. employable, labor force, and the redundant and therefore dehumanized Roma" (Vincze 2014: 448).

Previous ethnographic studies of Roma communities suggest explanations of the early marriage choice of young women as a survival strategy: "...young girls giving birth early did not do so because they did not want to study or learn a trade, but they assessed the opportunities available to them and found none, which, in turn, had a significant influence on their choices and behavior concerning childbearing" (Durst 2002: 466). Poverty is an important factor that influences marriage practices in poor Roma communities. But this factor could also intersect with the cultural one: child marriages explained by reference to "tradition".

Early marriage among Roma people: the cultural factor

Roma women experience a conflict between traditional culture and modern society. Child marriages may be explained by the Roma as "traditional" or "natural", based on biologically determined reasons—that a mature girl ready to have children should fulfill her gender-based role of mother and wife. For leaders, "tradition" means obedience to elderly members of the community and a taboo on sexual relationships before marriage. This quotation of a female activist in a Roma NGO is an appropriate illustration of patriarchal culture: *"A woman, according to the Bible, in status [is] in ... second-place position. The woman knows her place, the woman [is] ... mother, homemaker. All the important issues are decided by a man"* (Roma NGO activist, Interviewee 10, 2013).

One respondent is very critical of the culture-based explanation of child marriage: *"Often community leaders say 'it's our tradition'. I have then only one question: Can violence against women be considered a tradition, a cultural achievement? For me, this is not an argument. For me it is a blatant violation of the rights of women"* (International NGO activist, Interviewee 6, 2013). Very often non-members of the community, or external experts, perceive early marriage as form of gender-based violence (connected with arranged marriage, abduction etc.). At the

same time, there is always the dilemma of reconciling our understanding of a culture (and its different perspective) with some recognized global issues (e.g. gender-based violence): “[The] *Important thing here—when we are talking about violence—*[is that we] *should* [strive to respect] *cultural issues for* [their] *diversity*. [But] *culture should not hide issue[s] of abuse or violence. For example, [if someone says] ‘I beat my wife because it is part of my culture’*” (International NGO activist, Interviewee 6, 2013).

Traditional patriarchal attitudes towards gender and sexual roles help support the practice. For example, huge value for Roma women, their families and community is placed on virginity; this means there is pressure on girls to marry young, so that there is less danger of their losing virginity before marriage. In addition, girls are expected to obey their parents: “*If a child is brought up according to God’s will, she must listen to her mother*” (Roma woman of older age, Interviewee 11, 2013).

The notion of the “normality” of child marriage in Roma communities is also contradictory. While some Roma boys and girls might support the practice, some could be critical of it, raising the issue of the diversity of experiences: Some could be positive, connected with love, and others with arranged (or even forced) relationships that may end in divorce.

Not only experts, but also Roma community members criticise societal norms. Opinions about the double standards regarding acceptable behavior for Romani women and men is a good illustration: “*There are even such Gypsies [who] have affairs [right] in front of you. You can’t say anything. [But] God forbid you do the same, then they beat you and cut off your hair. They may even cripple you. But you can’t go to the police*” (Roma woman, married at 14, Interviewee 1, 2013).

This critical testimony shows that Roma women are not only victims of discrimination but also actors who have a voice to raise, or who should be allowed a voice to criticize and initiate change in situations they believe should be changed.

Conclusion and discussion

Both cultural and socioeconomic factors can be used to explain the early marriage phenomenon in Roma communities. The cultural explanations prevail among Roma women who are better integrated into modern societies.

At the same time, marriage and motherhood might be studied more as a “survival strategy” of Roma women. “Traditions” play their role specifically in more

economically deprived communities and may be used for “othering” marginal groups in the society. That is why economic factors should be investigated more in discussing the situation of Roma communities.

Women are almost disregarded as a target group of social and economic development programs, including the program to eliminate poverty (Ukraine 2014: 9). Yet gender is one of the significant factors of heterogeneity of Roma communities. Roma problems should be approached from the perspective of gender (as well as other inequalities).

At the same time, the international human rights discourse on marriage should not be considered uncritically. Despite the socioeconomic problems that Roma women face, they should not be perceived only as victims who do not have the agency to raise their voices and change their lives.

Some Roma NGOs in Ukraine are already implementing projects to “build the knowledge of Roma girls about reproductive health, family planning and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies”. Roma sociomedical mediators are drawn from Roma communities to act as intermediaries between people living mainly in Roma settlements and social and medical services. Since 2010 there have been Roma mediators working in different parts of Ukraine. They are one of the best forms of outreach to the Roma community (as told by Roma NGO activist, Interviewee 8, 2013).

It is also important to ask Roma women about their wishes. The empirical study presented in this article reveals that Roma women want employment for themselves and their husbands, and non-segregated, accessible education for their children. Scholars of Roma issues criticize EU Roma policies for having failed to address the systematic causes of social inequalities, exclusion and advanced marginality (Vincze 2014: 443). Meritocratic perceptions of the poor, “manifestations of the racialization of poverty” (Vincze 2014: 445) should be challenged in the discussions over strategies and policies towards Roma communities in general and Roma women in particular.

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List of Interviewees

Interviewee 1: Roma woman, 22 years, 5 children, first child at the age of 14, Volyn', November 2013;

Interviewee 2: International NGO on children's rights employee, Kyiv, October 2013;

Interviewee 3: Human rights NGO activist, Kyiv, October 2013;

Interviewee 4: Roma NGO activist, Kyiv, October 2013;

Interviewee 5: Roma woman, 20 years old, married at 13, 3 children, illiterate, Volyn', November 2013;

Interviewee 6: International NGO activist, November 2013;

Interviewee 7: Researcher of Roma issues, Kharkiv, October 2013;

Interviewee 8: Roma NGO activist, November 2013;

Interviewee 9: Roma man, 20 years old, 3 children, illiterate, married at 13, Volyn', November 2013;

Interviewee 10: Roma NGO activist, Kyiv, October 2013;

Interviewee 11: Roma woman, older age, Volyn', November 2013.

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Table 1. Marriages by groom's age and bride's age (2012)

Total number of marriages in 2012	Bride's age		Groom's age	
	<16	16-18	<16	16-18
556552	84	14472	1	2087

Source: State Statistics Service of Ukraine