



**Gender Equality and Antidiscrimination for Roma**

## **MODULE 2**

**Contrast negative cultural practices and  
attitudes toward girls**

## SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

Negative cultural practices toward girls and females in general are widespread and involve every known culture and human group and can be observed in both Roma and non-Roma societies every nation and every class and group.

Religious system has also contributed to this, by creating a narrative where women are “weak”, “dangerous”, “impure” and prone to sin and errors. No matter how this set of belief was created and perpetuated, the result is under our eyes: even today, in the XXIst century, women are paid less than men, and they have less opportunities in career and in public political life. Laws and regulations have tried to tackle this issue, but it remains a mechanism that is deeply ingrained in popular culture at all levels. Discrimination against women is one of the factors that mostly prevent emancipation and growth. Double standards reinforce this attitude by consolidated attitudes toward “purity” and “impurity”. Unveil the necessity of men to control women’s actions and to “protect” their honour in terms of marriage choices, behaviour, and reproduction.

Gender relations have historically characterised men as models for normality and rationality, but it must be understood, again, that gender is a social construction; a construction that becomes a pressure to conform and that has important consequences for women and children because the dominant model remains in fact unchallenged.

In classic, traditional, or “ethnographic” groups, role and economic activities are generally strictly gender based, and regulated by the community’s expectations and systems of cultural values.

Women's public image is very important for she represents the whole household. Their behaviour is controlled not only by members of their family but also by more familial and kinship relations, where any “deviant” conduct risk to bring shame and dishonour to the family group.

To be a woman requires certain quality: first, that of correctly managing codes and rules of this society. For this reason, women are educated in the obedience to their father and husband and to the accomplishment of their duties as wives and mother.

Masculinity is a contradictory and confusing term, but it is a central key point for anyone that wants to work in the field of equal opportunity and to produce real changes. The model proposed for men is not less problematic than the model proposed to women. It reinforces and constrict men into complying to masculine models considered as “appropriate” by defining what is manly and what is not. A censorship on expressing feelings, the need to deny or to conceal certain personality aspects: men should be brave, in control, powerful, strong, rational. Thus, masculinity becomes an element of separation from one’s true self and forces men to enact very different public and private behaviours: the key skill of feeling management is completely overlooked, leaving males in a perennial ambivalence

It is widely assumed that a woman's proper place is her home, but actually she is also encouraged to move outside the encampment towards the inner city to work. While the gathering of discarded goods from the dustbins requires travelling in the area immediately surrounding the encampment, the customary Manghèl practice is generally conducted outside the settlement, in centre town.

All trips are made by feet and by bus, even though many Romnì are perfectly able to drive the family van. When asked whether they have got a driving license they would most indifferently answer no, and in fact the official license is lacking, but nearly all of them are as competent drivers.

This behaviour serves to formally preserve men's public image as head and breadwinner of the family. At the same time, it demonstrates his wife's socially expected qualities like modesty and dependency. This form of dissimulation leaves formally untouched the visible social structure and its roles while revealing other invisible elements left unsaid.

These apparent contradictions in the *Romni*'s expected behaviour have been observed also by Okely (Okely 1995:257)<sup>1</sup> by the English resident's travellers studied during her fieldwork in UK.

An explication of this anomaly has been explained by this author in the light of concepts like purity and contamination and in the double relationship men/women - *Rom/Gagi*, in which is the *Romni* who takes the responsibility of the contact with the *Gagi* world, which is conceived as potentially contaminating<sup>2</sup>.

But apart from the symbolic-anthropological factor there is another important issue related to this which lies in the different economical activities engaged by men and women and their different relations with the surrounding social context. Through the practices of palm reading and *Manghèl* and the shopping at markets women have the chance of meeting a larger spectre of people. The need to communicate inherent with these activities enable them to learn faster than their husbands the language of the host country (if they are of foreign origin like in Italy), furthermore this jobs include a continuous interaction with the non-Roma.

On the other hand, men also have contacts with other groups, but their interaction is more short and kept simple by the nature of the business, besides men's contacts are generally limited to unskilled workers, porters and other activities of manual labour while women can haul up to a wider range of people.

There's then another peculiarity -also observed by Okely- which is the one related to bravery, courage, and the ability to fight.

As we will see, this peculiar aspect represents a potential resource of strength and energy that can be used in critical times of life. Also, this is an officially unsaid quality, rather alluded than explicitly mentioned but nonetheless considered as an essential character trait for a proper *Romni*.

In the traditional context this capacity can be activated for example to refuse through the escaping an unwanted marriage, but it can also be used in other context, as an engine for new ways of emancipation, like the one which are created through the contact with the *Gagi* world (school, institutions, Ngo's etc.).

Marriage is considered as one of the most important events in a woman's life, and together with births (especially of male children) is solemnly celebrated by the whole extended family. The rule generally observed is that of patrilocal residence, for which the bride goes living with her husband's family, who can sometimes be very far and even in different cities or nations. This issue of separation is often a highly dramatic moment: the young bride will now be separated from family and friends, and must be apt to adapt to the new environment.

In the more traditional settings, the bride is expected to contribute to the wealth of her new family by different means: her ability as a housewife, in work or begging, and, most important of all, her fertility.

Arranged marriages can be quite common. Sometimes things go on well and the couple establishes a good relation forming a new family, but things aren't always that easy. In the case of forced marriages, the woman

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<sup>1</sup> It is the case of the encounters who took place in institutional places like the Municipality Offices or others.

<sup>2</sup> Okely J. (1975), *Gypsy Women: Models in Conflict*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, republished as: *Donne zingare. Modelli in conflitto*. In: "Comunità girovaghe, Comunità zingare", (a cura di) L. Piasere, (1995), Ed. Liguori, Napoli.

can be forced to work and live with a man she doesn't love, cut off from all her friendly and parental relation who could have helped and supported her. However, also in these dramatic cases, there is the chance for a way out. The couple can “run-away” together, and once they come back, often the marriage can be arranged anyway, even if the familiar choice was different

The situation can vary according to the different cultural, economic and social situation: the EU has very diverse declinations: in Italy<sup>3</sup> and Belgium, both EU countries constitute two examples where Roma are “foreigners”, even if coming from EU countries like Romania and Bulgaria and in other cases from Western Balkan states.

Other countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Roma are citizens, have regular documents and share the same language of their fellow citizens. In many instances they have representative members in councils and other local and national governments and in international organizations

The contexts could be really different in terms of welfare, state services, investments, social and health system and methodological approach. The difference in the welfare system affects directly the “foreigner”, which at least in the beginning of the migratory projects is extremely vulnerable. In Italy there is the well-known phenomenon of the encampments for Roma, and in spite of some interventions in a large scale, the encampment system remains very much in place. The camp is closed and separated from the rest of the city: it is a closed, separated space where the community is very much left on his own. In these ghettos, it is easier to be under a stricter social control and to live according to the “traditional” community values and principles.

## **Roma Inclusion**

The integration of migrant groups coming from different nations represents one of the tests bed of the true ability for western societies to be inclusive The most prevalent approach to this phenomenon of inclusion, even at an international level, is an interculturalization that respects and values differences.

However, this vision is not problem free, because sometimes the value-related-measures used to make comparisons between cultures are so diverse that it becomes impossible to find any true cohesion between the different perspectives. A most interesting example of this difficulty can be found when studying the policies with respect to the Roma community in Europe.

Roma inclusion has long been a matter of interest to nations and wider EU institutions. In the past decade the EU has invested considerable political, financial and intellectual resources to address the challenges of Roma inclusion to wider society. These efforts have produced legislative and financial tools aimed at creating a more upwardly mobile and engaged citizen base within the largely destitute Roma community; In spite of these considerable efforts, the challenge of integrating this predominantly impoverished and disengaged community remains, on balance, unsolved.

The Roma community’s population in Europe is estimated to be between 10 and 12 million people. This population figure places them as a relatively small minority group. Then why do government invested so heavily to integrate and elevate this particular community? Why the considerable political and financial effort

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<sup>3</sup> Italian Roma are officially Italian citizens, but the Roma from EU are not and they often have problems with regularizations

has not resulted in more integration; or rather, after such large investment they remain separate from functioning society. What are the continued obstacles that have prevented their full integration?

It seems that a direct result of a number of these interwoven social and government interventions which were designed to create a more inclusive society have brought about the exact opposite outcome to inclusion.

Roma have succeeded in keeping unchanged their social structure and economic practices, helped in this by a residential segregation that is at the same time imposed (for example in Italy, the encampment system has been created by mean of Regional Laws to “protect the nomadic lifestyle”) and self-imposed (the residence in the encampment has never been compulsory).

The economic activities practiced, such as the gathering and sale of metal and secondhand objects and garments, are carried on a family basis, and, due to their informality and irregularity of supply they have been an ineffective means towards real inclusion with the wider population. Access to a steady income and regular employment (rather than the traditional Roma informal economic modes) would allow members of the community to plan for non-traditional Roma life-paths. But should members of the community choose to enter more formal employment, Roma traditions would lose their grip and internal power dynamics within their community would be irrevocably changed. It seems clear to me, if members of the Roma community wish to preserve their traditional structures, it is particularly necessary on their part to control the women within the community structures, and to ultimately obstruct women from entering the mainstream employment pool.

To achieve this goal, there are several tools and strategies to use and be enacted to ensure that society’s values and structures remains unquestioned from one generation to the other. The key function of some particular forms of behavior is the preservation of the status quo, and its defense against outsiders’ intervention. The community is small and very close-knit, and reputation within the group constitutes an invaluable and irreplaceable asset. As in many other geographical and linguistic “traditional” groups, the burden of publicly displaying the “honor” lies on women’s shoulder. Their aspect, skills, accomplishments, behaviors, public figure, motherhood, and housemaid capacity are constantly under observation. This constant control is almost unavoidable in a village or in any other concentrated dwelling (even a city neighborhood in many cases) and it displays fully its incredible power of coercion by pushing everyone into conforming. If it happens otherwise, there could be social shaming, isolation, shunning, and this fear of being declared an “outcast”, pushes strongly toward abiding.

Here the context could really make a change. If there are social services to go, a good well-functioning health and education system, if housing and occupation are relatively easy to access to, then there is a chance for the individual or the group in “dissent” to make other choices, with the institutional or an NGO support; but often the ties with the community are so strong that individuals try to act in a balance that is not always possible, like in the cases of forced marriages, where the person is challenged with the devastating choice of abandoning forever the community and parents

## Honor and shame system

European and Mediterranean anthropology speaks of an *honor and shame system* which can be identified and traced as stretching from India to Maghreb. Within these particular social systems women represent the family honor and they are, therefore, the first group members who must be controlled and restricted. These controls are focused on marital practices and reproduction as forms of domination and thus ensures the perpetuation of restrictive and limiting social structures for women.

The main tool of this system is early marriage, which constitute a reason often given for young girls dropping out of school. Removing young girls from school also affords the opportunity for communities to block exposure to outside ideals and cultures, thus protecting and guaranteeing the continuation of this oppressive system.

Keeping communities isolated make it possible to protect the cultural norms as these ethnic ghettos afford an environment where social controls are immensely strong and the engagement of young women in emancipatory action becomes nearly impossible.

To continue to live in the isolation of the community will allow to adhere to a double register: that of clan and that of citizenship, and in the closely knit group, where social control is immensely strong, is still in place, then it will be very difficult to engage in emancipation processes.

Roma are thus taken in between two sets of contrasting value sets which cannot co-exist as one would represent the end of the other, and the lack of viable alternatives make the adoption of the ethnic package almost compulsory.

The conceptualization of Roma as a “super-diversity” has meant that the intervention was mainly oriented toward cultural protection, mediation, and advocacy, avoiding potentially risky themes such as job inclusion.

To invest on mediation means implying that Roma population needs practicing a continuous work of translation with institutions and the non-Roma, thus reinforcing the image of a group separated from the rest of the population, carrier of specific needs and dependent from a system of welcoming.

For many migrants’ mediation is intended as a temporary intervention during the first phase of the arrival, in order for themselves to orient and familiarize with services and institutions. This has been achieved by means of several inclusive tools that host countries can offer (“150” hours course, language courses for foreigners etc.). Only for the Roma mediation has been institutionalized becoming an intervention to be implemented on a national scale. However, the only true successful measure of the efficacy and impact of this mediation project is in the diminished need for the training and support; not in an increased need for these interventions which indicate from their actions a lack of equality and integration-

Societal categories given at birth, those of race and ethnicity, are identity designations that are used to perpetuate a divisive society. These descriptors are used to construct power differences and maintain elite control to prevent interethnic alliances that might challenge the status quo. In fact, similarities between poor whites and poor ethnics remain repressed and invisible, conflict and difference among them is encouraged. The resulting simplistic view of “majoritarian” and “minoritarian” maintains the power dynamic of majority over minority and encourages the perception that the two social categories are egalitarian, immutable and unchangeable.

## **Failures of Roma community integration and counterbalance the stereotypes**

Failures of Roma community integration is blamed on external causes such as institutional neglect, which is undeniable, but there are also internal conservative Romani forces which prevent the development of integration and emancipation towards equality.

This is why the cultural *metissage* is a key tool, and this is why schools, and particularly in early childhood, are so important in order for the child to develop the concept of free choice. The daily meetings with other children from other groups allow and stimulate the capacity and the skill set needed to interact meaningfully with others outside the community, where compliance is the norm and “deviant” behaviors are simply not allowed.

The best way to counterbalance the stereotypes is that of practicing and teaching children to interact in an equal way, and to reveal the hidden reasons behind the need to control women. Unveil men’s fear.

We have explained how important, and through which means and strategies is the control of women’s relations achieved. The goal is the continuation of the society as it is, and of which women’s and girl’s discrimination constitute a central, essential part, becoming an “enabling factor”.

Being ostracized, labelled negatively, and criticized or even shunned is a terrible experience also with adults. Much more so when the victim represents a society sector more fragile because of age and sex. Relationship between the two sexes is learned by the daily observation of familiar and peer interactions. If the verbal and non-verbal message is that “women will know their place” children of both sexes within the family would be pushed to imitate and reproduce their parents’ behaviour.

We, as children, believe our parents to be the best, and the ones who knows best: they feed us, they warm and console us, they protect us from dangers so that it becomes impossible for a child to determine and chose the appropriate behaviour to display, being in the same situation but elsewhere. They learn to respond by watching other people’s response, and unless a situation is specifically used to show other possible models of behaviour, the learning process has already done his work, and the child will learn and reiterate as an adult according to the model he has been witnessing in his childhood.

## **PRACTICAL EXERCISES:**

Guide a discussion on a selected topic offering practical instruction as to how to lead a conversation avoiding sexist and male centred approaches. Gentleness and fairness are key skills to support children toward a harmonious growth process. A good start could be for example enacting a real-life situation in the presence of a selected “stranger”; it could be an imaginary professor, or an employer. The key mechanism lies in the task of putting the children in a situation where they must behave according to rules of fairness, a case which not often happens among peers or in families. The simulation has the potential to directly show the effect of maladaptive behaviour.

What happens inside the family in pertinent/relevant occasions? Is the “common sense” accepted by all? Single out, in the focus group, possible “parents’ leader roles”. Learn the inner society’s values; register what is for them important (or, better, expected) and suggest, drawing from practical and if possible, real-life situations, an alternative way of dealing which does not reinforce the practices of the community toward the girl.



- What are the examples of negative cultural practices within your group?
- How do they work in practice? Who enacts/enforces them?
- What is the logic of the practice? What is its use? Which sectors of society benefit the most from adopting certain practices?

Negative cultural practices and attitudes toward girls are detrimental to their well-being and hinder their opportunities for growth and development. Let's contrast these negative practices and attitudes with positive alternatives:

- 1. Negative Practice: Gender-Based Violence**
  - **Positive Alternative: Promote Gender Equality and Safety**
    - Advocate for laws and policies that condemn and penalize gender-based violence.
    - Encourage educational programs that teach respect, consent, and healthy relationships.
    - Provide support services for victims of gender-based violence.
- 2. Negative Attitude: Discrimination in Education**
  - **Positive Alternative: Equal Access to Education**
    - Advocate for policies that ensure equal access to quality education for girls.
    - Promote awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes that limit girls' educational choices.
    - Implement scholarship programs and incentives to keep girls in school.
- 3. Negative Practice: Child Marriage**
  - **Positive Alternative: Delayed Marriages and Empowerment**
    - Advocate for and enforce laws against child marriage.
    - Provide educational opportunities and skill development programs for girls.
    - Raise awareness about the negative consequences of early marriage on girls' health and well-being.
- 4. Negative Attitude: Gender Bias in Healthcare**
  - **Positive Alternative: Equal Access to Healthcare**
    - Ensure equal access to healthcare services for girls.
    - Implement programs that focus on maternal and reproductive health education.
    - Challenge gender biases in medical treatment and research.
- 5. Negative Practice: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**
  - **Positive Alternative: Promote Bodily Autonomy and Health**
    - Advocate for strict legal measures against FGM.
    - Provide education on the physical and psychological consequences of FGM.
    - Support communities in developing alternative rites of passage that do not involve harm.
- 6. Negative Attitude: Limited Economic Opportunities**
  - **Positive Alternative: Economic Empowerment**
    - Create vocational training programs for girls to develop marketable skills.
    - Promote equal employment opportunities and fair wages.
    - Encourage entrepreneurship initiatives for girls and women.
- 7. Negative Practice: Unequal Inheritance Rights**
  - **Positive Alternative: Equal Property and Inheritance Rights**
    - Advocate for legal reforms that grant equal property and inheritance rights to girls.
    - Raise awareness about the benefits of gender equality in property ownership.
    - Provide legal support to girls facing discrimination in inheritance matters.
- 8. Negative Attitude: Cultural Stereotypes and Norms**
  - **Positive Alternative: Cultural Sensitivity and Gender Inclusivity**
    - Promote cultural sensitivity that values diversity and challenges harmful stereotypes.

- Encourage positive representations of girls and women in media and cultural expressions.
  - Support cultural initiatives that foster gender inclusivity and equality.
9. **Negative Practice: Nutrition Disparities**
- **Positive Alternative: Addressing Nutritional Needs**
    - Implement nutrition programs that specifically address the unique nutritional needs of girls.
    - Educate communities on the importance of balanced nutrition for girls' health and development.
    - Ensure equitable distribution of resources to address nutritional disparities.
10. **Negative Attitude: Lack of Representation in Decision-Making**
- **Positive Alternative: Representation and Participation**
    - Advocate for increased representation of girls in decision-making processes.
    - Encourage mentorship programs to empower girls to take on leadership roles.
    - Foster a culture of inclusivity that values the perspectives and contributions of girls.

Addressing negative cultural practices and attitudes toward girls requires a multi-dimensional approach, including legal reforms, education, awareness campaigns, and community engagement. By promoting positive alternatives, societies can work towards creating environments that empower and support the rights of girls.

#### **For social services operators:**

Remember how important it is to assess the context and the situation. Visits to the households are strongly encouraged and they can constitute an appropriate baseline for the measurement of inclusion indicators, specifically including also gender mainstreaming indicators. There is much that a social worker can do in this initial moment of observation.

To assess the context, it is paramount to note the following key questions: Where is he/she living? Are they nationals or non-nationals? How and why, they came in contact with the local services? What is his/her occupation? What is the need arising? Parent involvement and level/knowledge of services and their use. School attendance/truancy if any)

#### **For Public Administrators:**

Ensure that the social worker is going to visit in person the families, observing the context and reporting to the office. It is the same procedure used in many other social intervention cases, the difference here is that the theme of gender equality is more subtle, and it is often learned at a very young age, and introjected and re-enacted through the observation and subsequent repetition, of familiar practices.

Design and program periodic public encounters with experts both in institutional places and in the community. Experts should be practical people, can be academics but they must have a strong knowledge of the target because theory has here a very limited impact, and what is more needed are practical examples and case situations.

In public procurements, include a budget voice specifically dedicated to women to engage them concretely in programs and policies.

What studies and research have shown so far? How is it suggested to contrast this phenomenon? Which strategies and policies?

Learn from practice: the methodology of putting theoretic knowledge into practices through the analysis of key cases and situations. Explain why negative attitudes and practices are mainly based on the fear of losing privileges that comes within gender and by the fear of losing power and control.

Preventative education is central because prevention addresses problems before they blow. A key point in preventative education is that the more the knowledge, the better, and more incisive the action. A tool to be used is that of the so called “compensatory pedagogy”; it is a type of affirmative action.

The best way to counterbalance the stereotypes is that of practicing and teaching children to interact in an equal way, and to reveal the hidden reasons behind the need to control women.

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