



Gender Equality and Antidiscrimination for Roma

MODULE 7

**How to strengthen the role of familiar
responsibility in improving girls' status**

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INTRODUCTION

In traditional societies the characteristics desired for each sex are attributed at birth, and they have much to do with the working activities that the society practices: in agriculture and herding for example, roles for men and women are quite diverse.

However, these sharp separations can become more nuanced when we analyse urban contemporary economic models.

Today, in a world dominated mainly by activities in the realm of the so-called tertiary sector, there is no need any more to invest in stereotypical male qualities such as strength, agility, or physical and weight superiority. Changes are of course occurring mostly in urban centres everywhere around the world, however, there is still a substantial part of the world which still lives according to the old standards. However we must not be deluded by the “westernized progress”, because if we observe the western world, we see that in spite of the significant changes intervened by mean of historical women’s conquests in the field of gender equality, there is still present an underground stream of silent agreement of which are the society’s expectations when it comes to the status of being born a male or a female, and this subterranean flow is still very much at work in our societies.

This introduction was important to frame the focus of this seminar, which is dedicated to family involvement in the education of children in respect to society’s obligations and expectations, and parents’ will. We have seen from the questionnaire answers, that youngsters can be involved in decisions concerning their future and their aspiration, however, from direct field observation, we can also affirm that “to correctly behave” represent a clearly important issue for families; more so when these families are living in a close-knit community or in an urban context, often seriously affected by poverty, unemployment, deprivation and discrimination: this general context originates a strong pressure to conform on behalf of the children. Often in these social contexts it is difficult to make parents understand how education and right to education are key factors for the future child integration in the social life. Data from almost all research undertaken in the field of Roma access to education shows that the Roma community has a very low degree of schooling, and they show the highest percentages of school dropout rates¹.

Families and groups living in extreme poverty, can find difficult the idea of capitalising money and time in a challenge that might (or might not), bring the desired, hopefully successful results. The “ethnic cultural package”, represent a model whose validity is confirmed by its widespread acceptance and by its validity in terms of reproduction and continuation of both the species and the culture it brings within. It is a package that has worked for generation, and it has the advantage of presenting smaller risks compared to the challenges brought on by formal education and employment, where the rules are different, competition is fierce and there is no protection or support available from parents and the enlarged family. Therefore, regarding the child development and early inculturation, the first agency to involve is certainly the family, and particularly the children’s mothers.

As the saying goes “When you educate a mother you educate a whole family group”; it is quite evident that parental involvement in communities is crucial for fostering a supportive environment for children's development and well-being.

¹ On this subject there is a massive amount of documents, studies and researches. The European Roma Strategy 2020 – 2030 produced by the European Commission after a Council proposal contains a number of important references. It is available here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1813

This clearly highlights the importance of the family influence in the child's history: our parents are our role model in the most important, formative years: those of our early socialization. The child observes and learn from everything happening around him and from how people around behave and relate to him/her. Within this environment he/she "breaths" the family atmosphere and learn how to react appropriately in the various ongoing situation and in daily contexts. The child wants unconditional love and support and approval, and in searching this fulfilling combination, he/she will do his best to comply with the family's approved answers and codes. During this phase parents represent the authority and the security. Verbal and nonverbal messages are continuously exchange within the family setting. The problems might arise when, the messages are violent or dysfunctional, because regardless of how unadaptive and damaging the message might be, the child does not have the strength and confidence to question parents' decisions or to oppose their will because he/she knows (learning it very early) that any behaviour or response deviant from the accepted norm can create unhappiness and critical situations.

If in a family there are frequent tensions, the voices always shouting, the dialogue often confrontational, the child learn that shouting and rage are the appropriate responses. Often, families of this kind, tend to be completely unavailable emotionally, and this brings a feeling of constant fear overall upon the child: fear of being rejected, feel of being abandoned, feel like he/she "does not do enough" to please the parents and to comply with their expectations. This combination of factors is an example of how deep and how pervasively, the family choices and attitudes engulf and involve the child. The case above relates to unhealthy psychological contexts and mechanisms which are "transmitted" from one generation to the other, however, gender issues work in a very similar way.

In the questionnaire filled for this survey, we have had several respondents who have highlighted the role of grandparents: this is especially the case of Romania, where there is a high presence of grandparents involved in children education and caring, due to the migratory project of the parents, which has in some cases brought them abroad, leaving the children behind at home. This situation of parental substitution should be taken into consideration when present, as it requires the activation of several agencies and people. It would be very important to help keeping contacts with the family abroad and in supporting the elders who might need care also.

The survey conducted for this project in the four countries involved have all confirmed that there is quite a strong division between the tasks assigned to each family member and it is mainly based on gender. This data is shared by all interviewed in all countries. Some specific tasks, such as familiar care for elders and children are almost invariably assigned to women (mothers in general, but also sisters). Percentages are ranging from 89 to 96% assigning to mothers all household chores, with childcare ranging from 70 to 96%. Sisters are also involved in these two tasks, although in much smaller numbers. This element demonstrates how reliable women are considered as they are entrusted these tasks. However, the same survey, when interviewing about who oversees managing the family financial aspects almost invariably assign this task to men, except for Romania, where also paperwork's and financial issues are female-managed. This difference can be explained by the fact that either the male parent is working outside the settlement or village, or to migration to other countries, thus preventing the husband from being involved in these aspects. Always in the case of Romania, we also witness a shift in parental responsibility from parents to grandparents also due to the migratory project.

These data are important because they show the resistance of a very traditional model based on gender; a confirmation also emerges from the qualities expected from both men and women². Clearly these data have to be taken with a grain of salt; sociologists know well that it is difficult to register the full nuances of this simply through a direct question in a questionnaire, and that often people give the answer according to what is considered to be socially acceptable, but it is worth to remember how big is the pressure on individuals to conform in particularly close-knit communities like in mono (or predominantly) ethnic or rural groups.

The key action for every intervention on the ground is that of directly involving and, most important, engaging the families in what we are doing, clearly explaining the final goals of the activities and the benefits and improvements that can be achieved. Strategic thinking is the skill that we must try to improve and strengthen the family's motivation by debunking the possible existing distrust. Education and training are not to be considered as harmful or damaging or useless for the children belonging to the community, but they should rather be seen as an addition, an element which adds more to the competences and sets of values already present and given by the family themselves. Families should be encouraged to familiarize with the school environment, which should be open and welcoming; it is strongly advised that teachers and trainers should pay frequent and regular visits to the village or neighbourhood or dwelling. Establish relationship of durable mutual knowledge and allowing the parents to see that nothing "harmful" is taught to their sons and daughters. It is important that parents are involved when children are progressing, learning new things, or performed particularly well; it is also important to underline and highlights the talent, the commitment, or the motivation of the student. This is something that can be shown to parents and can improve their trust in the education system. Also of key importance is the living example of peers that, coming from the same background, have had positive results and have been successful in their trade of choice just thanks to the educational achievements. In many countries there is a well-established Roma elite of intellectuals, activists, and scholars, and they could represent a tangible, realistic example of the opportunities that formal education can bring to women. This means that families must be given a real opportunity to see the achievements reached by girls and having pride in supporting them; they also should acquire familiarity with the school environment and with school professionals. Of course this might not be possible with all parents; some might be more conservative and stricter, some others more open, but again, for social workers, the task remains the same: that of building, bridging, and bonding with families, with the final goal of becoming accountable and trustworthy as operators within the community.

The establishment of this bond of trust between the professional and the families is of paramount importance, and apart from its final goal, which is that of ensuring child education and empowerment, it has the added advantage of providing the family with a network, both institutional and not, that can be accessed in time of need or simply as something that "is there and helps". This "bridging and bonding" phase is of extreme importance because it will set the tone and atmosphere of all relations further on, so it is important for the professional to be well prepared to present the project, its goals, and ways of realization, and how it will be enriched by the family participation to some of the activities. It is important to be very clear avoiding technical terms as much as possible and offering as many information as possible, also using a short leaflet containing the list of available services, how to access them, and the contact information. In this way the family can easily and immediately see a concrete help. Explain also that services have a duty to serve the

² Neetu A. John; Kirsten Stoebebau; Samantha Ritter; Jeffrey Edmeades; Nikola Balvin, 2017, Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. Conceptualization, influences and outcomes. Available at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/885-gender-socialization-during-adolescence-in-low-and-middle-income-countries-conceptualization.html>

public and inform them on how to request this or that document, do not help directly by accompanying, except situations where some help is needed.

The starting point in the building of this trust should be the acknowledgement of family's resources and competencies; the style of intervention should avoid the creation of a family dependence from services or operators avoiding demanding behaviours that will hinder the family road to autonomy; you must offer clear information and support for bureaucratic and other possible issues but unless there are well grounded specific reasons try not to accompany them, rather guiding them through services and ensuring follow up. If families must be encouraged to exercise parental responsibility, then dependence from services and operators should be avoided at all costs. Finally, it must be always kept in mind that interventions must be conceived and implemented with the help of a network, institutional and informal, therefore, considering all the possible variables and issues that need to be addressed and providing in a comprehensive perspective, the concrete tools to deal with these variables in a timely and efficient way.

Family's priorities and need must be listened to, and they must be corroborated by personal observation and by the comparison with other sources (teachers, other educators etc.), in this way we can come close to a representation of reality more objective than the one made solely on our or on our informants' impression. As we have stated throughout this whole guide, the process of direct, prolonged observation of contexts is the prime element of every program and plan; it is also important to investigate as to whether there have been previous projects involving the same group or the same family, and how did they end up, what outcome was produced. This will serve to help in identifying successful (or unsuccessful) ways of intervention and to help us calibrate better the one we are presently doing.

A delicate, for those working with disadvantaged youth in Europe, is the issue represented by phenomena of young criminality and deviance i.e. the legal/penal aspect, which is present in many situations in Europe, and involves very often also adolescents and youngsters. Petty crimes like theft or burglaries, and pick pocketing raids, car hijacking, and other crimes can be carried out by some groups, but neither within the community nor within families there does not seem to be a strong enough attitude toward an effective sanctioning of these behaviours. Other delicate issues might arise in the case where children, especially girls, are the subject of trafficking or of forced or arranged marriages or are involved in theft or any other criminal or risky and damaging activity (drug use, alcohol, others). Although these cases are always rarer in the community and they are not exclusively, especially in large urban contexts, it remains an issue for some other groups, and must be addressed and taken into consideration as part of a global approach.

For social workers and practitioners willing to work in the field of female emancipation must be aware of this background context in order to implement efficient and punctual interventions, tailored on the real situations and needs of the target group. In particular it is important to focus on *practicing* rather than mainly *advocating* for women and girl's empowerment. The daily behaviour and work ethic of the social workers involved, ought to mainstream in everyday's activities this principle, making it available for youngsters not as an enunciation, a motto, but as a daily tool to be used in relationships and in educational and working environments. What we can certainly affirm is that what is learned early within the family is often going to be replicated as it is considered as the familiar norm to conform to. It is difficult to promote a new approach when individuals have never had a chance to experience differently. Again, in the questionnaire's answers, it emerges the data regarding the long time spent at home or within the household. It is especially the case of many villages in the rural areas of Romania and Bulgaria. This detachment and relative isolation from "cultural contamination", prevent youngsters to be able to establish significant and mutual relationships with the out-village context. Parents should be encouraged to involve themselves more directly in their children

education, understanding that childhood is the only moment in life where time can be used in many, many ways. So, parents (or grandparents) should be supported in the process of enrolling their children to post school activities (sports or other). The social worker could for example provide a number of free activities to undertake where also parents would participate, in this way children would be offered the possibility of seeing their parents in contexts “other” than the traditional domestic setting; it opens up to a whole new range of possibilities of thinking “outside” the usual models, and opens further possibilities for intervention because when the goal of an action is shared by the community, the greater the chance that changes might be occurring. The most powerful educational tool lies as always in the practice, and, particularly when working with young children, in the practical example, witnessed as an everyday, average response. Often parents do not reflect really on what and how children are growing, because in their generations, no one was really expecting an opinion from children: and the main success in their education would be that of being able to withstand society’s judgement, according to the commonly shared values and cultural expectations, therefore, mainly to conform correctly to given standards and stereotypes.

We have seen how in the more traditional Roma families; women assume a caretaker role very early in their lives. They care for their younger siblings and help with house chores and in the case of establishing a formal relationship, it might happen that women are also entrusted to care for their boyfriend’s family members. All these tasks foresee the dedication of time and energy to fulfil appropriately the caretaker responsibilities. This is however, often incompatible with school life and with the concept of investing time in such things as education, making it difficult to attend school. In many cases, family may experience fears toward a potential relationship with other boys, etc.

Social maturity for women is reached with the birth of their first child. Therefore, it is not strange to observe that engagements and weddings are celebrated at a young age, and this directly impacts their educational possibilities.

All these characteristics influence the educational process of the children, and it is necessary to consider them in designing an adequate intervention with a family: as a social institution the family adapts to the social situation in which it lives in.

The data gathered for this project have also registered some important changes that are taking place and that should be highlighted:

The appearance and spread of new family models (single-parent homes mothers leading the home on their own, divorced, or separated families, cohabitation between two or three generations, etc.)

The family interacts in its socialising effort with an increasing number of institutions (health, employment, social services etc.). Other factors such as media, (television, but also new technologies: Internet, Facebook; Twitter, Blogs, etc.) have appeared and Roma also benefit from them. According to data from the direct survey of young Roma, 90.1% use digital platforms and only 5.7% explicitly state that they do not use any Internet technology.

Family, and in particular parents, have still a key importance in society including Roma communities. This is why it is so important to gain their support and involvement in the projects and programs dedicated to their children, particularly toward education. Several reports from NGOs working in the field of Roma inclusion have highlighted a number of attitudes that members of the Roma community show often toward the educational system: mutual distrust and prejudices, Roma see the school as “unfamiliar” to them, weakness

of the school relationship with parents, lack of motivation, lack of role model within the families and poverty³. Social workers and professionals should therefore carefully assess the familiar group object of the intervention; this assessment should be of a multi-dimensional kind and should be built with enough information to allow successive monitoring and evaluation and for the most punctual building of the individual or family intervention plan. These processes: construction of a baseline onto which measure and evaluate progress, set up of a list of indicators to measure, keep monitoring and registering. The data acquired with this method and in a systematic way, are the only reliable and accountable tools able to measure effective progress⁴. Direct observation may for example reveal the true charge related with the house chores for female children, and this information is key for the educational success of the child and cannot be gathered in any other way than by observation. To this end is also useful to consult other professionals working on the same field, especially if they are doing street work or fieldwork, these can be considered key informants just like the family members: all these actors, coupled with the process of observation, will enable the professional to work better and more efficiently and to find useful alliances and exchanges. It would be very useful to become familiar with existing tools dedicated to the promotion of political engagement for girls coming from a disadvantaged background⁵.

To be able to effectively strengthen the role of familiar responsibility the relationship with the family must be consolidated in time so that we can secure their collaboration by discussing every aspect of the intervention, analysing problems and possible solutions. Remember to prepare a clear and concise illustration of the projects' aim and phases, indicating for each step what is the goal, what the expectations are, trying to single out weaknesses and strength through common discussions. Provide families with clear information regarding the services to they might be entrusted, their operational capacity offering a basic knowledge of the opportunities offered and eventual benefits.

Families can be very unfamiliar with the school dynamics and the aspects that might influence the educational process, and they might only perceive the aspect of "support" expressed through material benefits such as free books and stationery and fail to see the "immaterial" support offered for example by tutorship's, by the other skills that can be acquired in school: social skills, motivational support, emotional and intellectual growth. Families are the one who must assume responsibility, and they ought to be enabled and supported in the process of discussing norms and limits of their children, in doing so, remember to always underline that all advancements, even the smallest, have been achieved thanks also to the family commitment, try to establish with them a working alliance, and to foster an exchange dimension. Clarify that education is compulsory for every child, helping them to understand the concept of parental responsibility. At the same time, work with schools and other institutions to have them ready and prepared to welcome.

There are numerous ways in which parents can be involved and actively participate and contribute to their communities:

³ See the FSG – REF, 2013, Guide for working with Roma families towards achieving the success of their children in school, Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/resources/guide-working-roma-families-towards-achieving>

⁴ See the FSG – REF, 2013, Guide for working with Roma families towards achieving the success of their children in school, Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/resources/guide-working-roma-families-towards-achieving> pp. 128 - 132.

⁵ A good example is the toolkit published by the Council of Europe in 2020

School Engagement:

- Try to engage parents as much as possible in the school activities and in their children's education and achievements: show how education can contribute to a better future for the youngsters.
- Organize public annual events to present the children's work made during the school year: this helps to make the family perceive the concrete, effective achievements of their children.
- Attend Parent-Teacher Meetings: Regularly attend parent-teacher meetings, not only to stay informed about a child's academic progress, behaviour, and any concerns arising, but in order to create an habit toward collective meetings and discussion, creating a routine that is a learning routine, trying to use these meetings to allow the parents to see the school and the services with their own eyes from a perspective of equality.
- Parental Education Programs: Implement programs that educate parents about the importance of education for girls, dispelling myths and addressing cultural barriers.
- Workshops and Seminars: Organize workshops and seminars for parents to understand the long-term benefits of investing in their daughters' education.
- Volunteer at School: Offer to volunteer for school events, extracurricular activities, or field trips to actively participate in your child's school life.
- Promote Equal Treatment: Encourage parents to treat their daughters and sons equally, providing the same opportunities for education, extracurricular activities, and personal development.
- Challenge Gender Stereotypes: Raise awareness about the harmful impact of gender stereotypes and encourage parents to support their daughters in pursuing any field of interest.
- Nutritional Support: Promote awareness about the importance of proper nutrition for girls' health and development, encouraging parents to provide balanced diets.

Community Events and Activities:

- Participate in Community Events: Attend community events, festivals, and gatherings to build a sense of belonging and community cohesion.
- Support Local Initiatives: Volunteer for or support local initiatives, such as clean-up campaigns, cultural events, or charity drives, as a family.

Parental Support Networks:

- Open Communication: Foster open communication between parents and daughters, creating an environment where girls feel comfortable discussing their goals, challenges, and concerns. Register and assess family common values and beliefs.
- Emotional Support: Encourage parents to provide emotional support and encouragement, fostering a sense of self-worth and confidence in their daughters.
- Join Parent Support Groups: Engage with local parent support groups to share experiences, seek advice, and provide mutual support.
- Establish Networks: Form networks with other parents to address common concerns and work collaboratively on community issues.

Youth Programs and Organizations:

- Support Youth Programs: Participate in or support youth programs, sports teams, and extracurricular activities that contribute to the positive development of children in the community.
- Collaborate with Youth Organizations: Collaborate with youth organizations to create opportunities for skill development, mentorship, and community service.
- Positive Role Models: Encourage parents to be positive role models by demonstrating qualities such as respect, equality, and a commitment to lifelong learning.
- Career Guidance: Provide guidance to parents on how to support their daughters in exploring diverse career paths and making informed decisions about their future. Organise informative “open days” both in the school institution and in the village or dwelling.
- Encourage the protagonism of young leaders: Through the establishment of scholarship, invest in the group’s talent; economic support might be provided through a number of ways, although the best would clearly be a scholarship issued by the same school or other larger educational institution.
- Establish Parental Support Networks: Create networks where parents can share experiences and advice, providing mutual support in promoting the well-being and status of girls.
- Community-Based Organizations: Partner with community-based organizations that facilitate parent support groups focused on girls' empowerment.
- By empowering parents with knowledge, resources, and a supportive community, we can enhance their role in improving the status of girls, creating an environment where girls can reach their full potential. Parental involvement is a key factor in building a more equitable and inclusive society for girls.

Advocacy for Community Issues:

- Attend Community Meetings: Participate in local community meetings to discuss issues affecting families and children.
- Advocate for Change: Advocate for changes or improvements in community services, such as education, healthcare, and recreational facilities.
- Parental Involvement in Communities: Encourage parents to actively participate in initiatives that promote gender equality and support the well-being of girls.
- Community Dialogue: Facilitate community dialogues where parents can share experiences and learn from one another about effective strategies for empowering girls.

Education and Literacy Programs:

- Engage in Literacy Initiatives: Participate in literacy programs, book clubs, or reading initiatives to promote a culture of learning in the community.
- Share Knowledge: Share your skills and knowledge with others, contributing to the educational enrichment of the community.

Healthcare and wellbeing:

- Access to Healthcare: Advocate for parents to ensure that their daughters have access to quality healthcare, including reproductive health services. This topic might be extremely sensitive with some families and groups, it is therefore advised to treat these topics with the due tact and in respect of the individual beliefs unless they violate a law or human rights.
- Promote Safe Play Areas: Advocate for and contribute to the creation of safe play areas for children within the community.

Environmental Initiatives:

- Participate in Green Initiatives: Engage in environmental initiatives, such as tree planting or community clean-up projects, to instill a sense of responsibility for the environment in children.
- Promote Sustainable Practices: Advocate for sustainable practices within the community, promoting eco-friendly habits for families.
- Encourage Entrepreneurship: Support parents in encouraging entrepreneurial skills in their daughters, providing them with opportunities for economic empowerment.
- Equal Financial Education: Advocate for equal financial education for both sons and daughters, preparing them for financial independence.

Digital and Media Literacy:

- Support Digital Literacy: Stay informed about digital platforms and technologies, ensuring that children are using digital media responsibly.
- Organize Workshops: Collaborate with community organizations to organize workshops on digital and media literacy for parents and children.
- Promote Safe Internet Use: Educate parents on the importance of digital literacy for girls and promote safe internet use.
- Support Educational Technologies: Encourage parents to support the use of educational technologies that enhance girls' learning experiences.

Legal Awareness:

- Know and Advocate for Rights: Educate parents about the legal rights of their daughters, including the right to education, protection from discrimination, and inheritance rights.
- Legal Support Services: Ensure parents are aware of available legal support services in case of discrimination or rights violations.
- By actively participating in any of these ways, parents contribute not only to their child's well-being but also to the overall health and vibrancy of the community.
- Strong parental involvement fosters a sense of community, encourages positive social values, and provides children with a supportive foundation for their growth and development. Strengthening the

role of parents is crucial in improving the status of girls. Parents play a pivotal role in shaping their daughters' lives and creating an environment where girls can thrive.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES:

Focus group with parents where through a free discussion on several selected topics. The methodology is the same as the one used with children: simulating real situations where parents have to manage a number of different realistically possible and common situations in which they might find themselves.

Examples might be the following:

- The girl has been withdrawn from school to help the family at home or in their works. How to cope with this situation? Explain that it is a duty to enrol minors in school. Ask them for reasons and argument in favour of the investment of a number of years spent acquiring a formal education as it will greatly improve one's life prospect plans.
- Check how parental authority works: What is sanctioned? What is approved? What is tolerated? What is encouraged and rewarded? (This exercise can be easily carried out by using labels with written some commonly shared phrases (for example: It is natural for men to lead, or talking about fear is not masculine, or to have a bad reputation is worse for a girl than for a boy, or women are better at cooking than man) and challenge them with counterbalanced practical examples. Ensure group discussion with a moderator.
- The girl has been taken by the police while (begging? Stealing? Loitering? Using drugs? Using alcohol?) And any other illegal activity. What happens, step by step in each of the different situations? What strategies do the family adopts?
- Aspirations: stimulate parents to express their aspiration for their children's future, and then ask them to remember what his/her aspiration where when he/she was young. Were there any episodes of rebellion or resistance to the family's will?
- The girls have been asked in marriage underage or another any situation of disadvantage) by another family. Here we should work both cases: in the case the family included in this project approves the match, and vice versa. See and note the common strategies that families enact according to habits or personal advantage and the re model the situation with appropriate and according to European standards and rule.