



SEVERAL USUAL STORIES OF UNUSUAL ROMANI WOMEN, THEIR BATTLES AND VICTORIES, TEARS AND JOYS



My name is Mariana. I am Roma. I am 22 years old. I got married at 19. I chose not to get married early, because me and my family got other priority: to continue studying and finish my secondary education. I finished with excellent score the Vocational High School in Agriculture in Kuklen with a qualification degree Economist, Accountant and Agricultural Economist. This gives me the chance to continue studying in a higher school institution which is my dream. My husband, who has finished his secondary education, also supports me in this undertaking. With my choice, I want to motivate the Roma girls to study and complete not only elementary but at least secondary education. I have 2 daughters. I am

against early marriages for the following reasons:

- early childbirth can damage the woman's health
- premature mothers can not be adequate parents to their children
- women with no education and qualification can not make it successfully on the labor market

The Project „Prevention of early/ forced marriages”

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My name is Zlatka Yordanova Yordanova and I am Roma. I am now 32 years old. I got married when I was 15. One day my present mother-in-law, who is from Kuklen, went to my mother to ask me to become her daughter-in-law. My parents agreed, because the boy was from a good family, they were wealthy and from our town. We were engaged and then married. I couldn't oppose to their decision, because with Roma people it's a custom for children to obey their parents. Even though I got married early, I am always looking for a way to develop myself. That's why in the year 2000 I enrolled in seamstresses training course under a program of the European Union. I like the profession very much and after finishing the course I started working in the "Brilliant" Factory in the city of Plovdiv and I still work there. That's why I think I am a successful Roma woman since I managed to build a home and raise 2 children, whom I'm going to give the opportunity to continue their education.





I want to tell you a short story about my life, about the ups and downs, the fights and wins and the things that stimulated the change in me, so that I can be what I am now.

I am Roma, my name is Mladenka and I am 22 years old. I'm from the Roma neighborhood Humata in the town of Lom. I finished my primary education in the Roma school and ever since I was a little girl, I have always been eager to study and go to school. On my way I met a lot of irony, mockery and ridicule from people, and I mean people from my own neighborhood. My parents did not care and did not suspect of my dream to become a nurse.

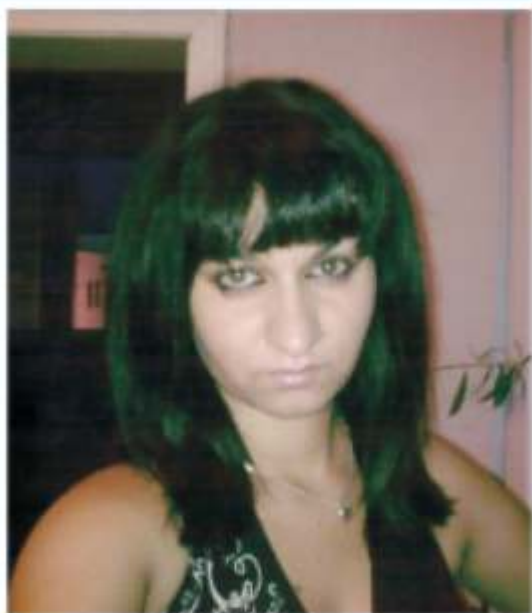
I completed my primary education with excellent marks and enrolled in the best high school in the town. That's when the real change in me began; when an even more powerful ambition seized me - to prove the others

that Roma people are also smart and intelligent, that they are equal in every way to the others. All my teachers and the entire school knew I was Roma, but I never faced any discrimination, I received a lot of support and help. In 2006 I graduated from the high school and wanted to continue my education. My parents and the shortage of finances stopped me. Like in most Roma families, the marriage and that it's time for me to get married became the topic of the day in mine, too, because studying is considered to be a waste of time and has no point in it.

I spent abroad the two years after my graduation, working with my family and I managed to save a certain amount of money. A year ago I finally applied for the university, I was admitted and now I am already in the second year. I've changed my family's opinion and now they are proud that I'm studying, they support me morally and financially.

My life took different direction. I hope there will be more girls like me who will not allow the environment to break them, but will change the environment themselves. I know that one swallow does not make the summer, but this is how it starts – good things happen slowly. Everything is possible, everything depends on us. My childhood dream has come true!

According to the survey, conducted by Center  
Annelipe in 2010, the average age for starting  
marital cohabitation among Roma in  
Bulgaria is 18 years and 6 months.



My name is Lyubka, I'm 16 years old and I'm in the 10th grade.

A lot of the Roma girls do not want to continue their education, for example they finish their primary education and stop going to school, and some do not even get there. In many of the cases parents are responsible for this – they are afraid to let their children continue their education in another town. I am also of Roma origin and the ambition to continue to study came from my father – he has 3 university diplomas and at the moment he is the mayor of our village. If he had not put his efforts into his education, that would not have been possible. His profession is chemistry and biology teacher. It was from a very early age that I wanted to study and then to have a good profession.

Those who stop attending school often get married at early age – 15-16 years old, which I do not think is right. Early marriage does not lead to anything good. Sometimes young people live together for 3-4 years, get divorced and children are the ones to take the consequences of this relationship – they grow up under really hard conditions when their parents are separated. Every child is the happiest when both parents are there. I think early marriage is a big mistake. Unwanted pregnancy is one of the ways to end up in this kind of situation, that's why we have to know how to have safe sexual life.

Young girls like me should know that it is better for them to finish their education before commit themselves to marriage and have children.

Most influencing and clearly revealed factor that affects the early start of marital cohabitation is education. As higher the educational level is as later the marital cohabitation and the marriages will occur. For example: at the age of 16 almost 50% of Roma who graduated elementary school or those with lower educational degree already have a partner, while among Roma with a University degree this percentage is reached only at the age of 25.



My name is Mariya Radkova Ivanova, I'm 23 years old and I'm from the village of Kardam, Popovo municipality, Targovishte region. I'm Roma from the group of the Coppersmith (Bakardzhii) and right now I am 4th year student, majoring Public Administration in the Veliko Tarnovo University.

My path was strewn with many difficulties and fights; I had to struggle for everything I achieved by now. My biggest struggle was to continue studying.

When I was a little girl I had one dream – to learn. Not a desire, nor striving, but a Dream. While for my classmates from the primary school education was a given and they even came as part of a duty, because their parents made them, for me the chance to be in class was a dream coming true.



Many of my peers dropped from school in the 5th and 6th grade. Some of them chose early marriage before education and are married now, have children and they have to work abroad to make a living. Others who didn't marry stay home all day and do nothing.

I can not imagine myself even for a moment in the place of these young girls.

It was very hard to convince my parents to let me study, but now I could say with confidence that I managed to come up to their expectations and they are proud of me.

And as to marriage – I think there isn't anyone who doesn't want to have a family of their own, but all in time. Now, when I'm 23, I feel ready for marriage and family, but of course, this will happen when I finish my education and have financial stability.

I had a dream and it was to learn. When a person dreams about something, a person should fight to the end for it and it will happen.

I'm happy I had the strength to fight for my dream and I am happier that I managed to achieve it.

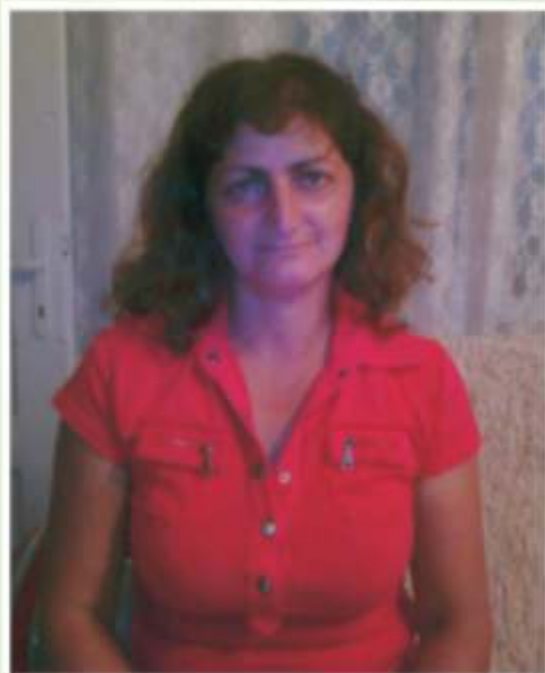
I chose education before early marriage and I am proud of this choice.

If you care about your future, listen closely to my story.

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I'm Rayna and I'm 38 years old. I live in the village of Kostandovo, but I'm from Rakitovo. I chose to get married at the early age of 15, because I liked my husband and because at that time I didn't think about the consequences and how hard my life would be.

My husband and his family didn't allow me to continue my secondary education, because he went to serve in the army and I had to be on my best behavior in the society. I really wanted to do something in the fashion field, but... people wouldn't approve a married women to "wander around".

I got pregnant fast and during the pregnancy I attended some seamstress classes. Soon I had my first boy and when I finished my maternity leave, I started working in a sewing workshop. I became one of the best seamstresses, my boss and colleagues respected me. I worked there for 17 years.

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I have 3 boys who are already married and have children of their own. Throughout these 23 years of marriage I had difficulties taking care of my 3 children, for my husband and his family. I was working and thinking how to provide for their future.

Early marriage is one big mistake, because your whole life passes by "at a run" – taking care of children, thinking about their future. Your private life is pushed in the background and you turn your back to yourself.

With us, the Roma people, the transition from the age of puberty to youth is missing. During the time we have to develop, get to know oneself and prepare for life, we start families, but we are not ready for this.

I appeal to all young girls not to be in a hurry with early marriage and to continue their education, so that they can develop themselves.

I could have become a designer, because I had talent, but all I became was a seamstress...

The Roma community is very diverse and this should be taken into account when undertaking any policies. For example, the group of Rudari (Romanian speaking Roma) starts a marital cohabitation later than other groups. The group of Millet (Turkish speaking Roma) and some of the sub-groups of those determining themselves as "Roma" begin marital cohabitation at the earliest age among all Roma groups

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My name is Daniela Yordanova, I'm 19 years old. I grew up in the "Nov Pat" Neighborhood in the city of Vidin. I graduated from my primary education in "Hristo Botev" School and then I continued with "Entrepreneurship and Business" in a secondary school in Bregovo. At that stage, I didn't have plans to continue my education afterwards, but after I met friends of mine who had dreams and strived for achievements, I too started to dream and to want something better for my future. Then I oriented to the economics and that's the area I chose to eventuate. I have passed the admission geography exam with Excellent 6 and I am now first year student in the Academy of Economics "D.A. Tsenov" in Svishtov.

I still don't know what my expectations about my student life are, something new and exciting lies ahead. But I hope to meet lots of good people, to find lots of new friends, who would push me towards new dreams, new desires.

I think that each person is unique as individuality with their own qualities. After I left my neighborhood behind and continued my education in another town, I began to like all sorts of things like listening to different music, wearing different style of clothes.

But even after I graduate, I am still going to be Roma and be empathetic to the problems of my people. For me, education serves to form one's personality. All of us, the young Roma, who study and those who have university degrees, we should help the rest to follow their dreams. Most of my friends are Roma girls, but they have a lot of friends who are not from the Roma community. For me love is something very important. Family is above all, but after family something inevitable comes – one has to work, earn money and therefore you have to search for reasonable solutions regarding love... Maybe I'll get married in the future, but that doesn't mean I have to be uneducated. If a boy gives me an ultimatum to stop developing, he can not be my boyfriend. I think one is always free, regardless of the circumstances surrounding them. When you want, you can always achieve what you want and education is an irreplaceable investment. Let's show the world that we are people with the same dreams and desires, even though we are from a different ethnic background. When I was a little girl, I was often inspired by Roma boys and girls who had university degrees. I want to tell all my peers never to stop dreaming and to always stay faithful to what they want and what they have wished for.



I am Veneta Zaharieva from Sliven. I am Roma. Choice or destiny? Which one is the truth? Is my life determined by a higher power? Is it destiny, a sequence I'm setting up... or both? These existential questions are important, but does one have to get lost in them? Is this a coincidence or not... I am a woman. I was born to be a woman: a choice I did not make and something I can not change, but I also do not want to. I'm happy to be what I am, in spite of all, in spite of the difficulties – living in a man's world where you are considered the “weaker sex”.

What am I really? This is neither riddle, nor puzzle that I will take up your time with, but my personal story. It begins like this: I was born 48 years ago in the Roma ghetto in the city of Sliven. I grew up with the children from my community, but chose to be different. I preferred to endure the insults of the people around, but not to marry early.

I'm one of the few girls who managed to complete their secondary education... despite the common disapproval, despite the stereotypes, I succeeded. I succeeded where others have failed.

I chose my destiny. I chose education before marriage... and I wasn't wrong. I suffered countless resentments and reproaches but life has rewarded me. Today I have a beautiful family – a loving husband, who supports me in everything and 3 children, who followed my example. I blazed a trail for them to follow.

Today I am a proud Roma woman, proud of what I have achieved at the price of many efforts and pain. I've changed, yes, and I've also changed the life of my children. I gave everything to make them people who will never forget they are Roma, but will also present themselves and the community in a good way... The three of them have good education, both of them graduated from university and now are going to study abroad. I myself have never missed an opportunity to educate myself, participating in retraining courses, although the common opinion is that I have “passed the school age”. But I haven't given up and I don't intend to. I am convinced that this is the key to success and change.

I'm not enjoying grandchildren and grand-grandchildren like my peers in the neighborhood, and I'm happy for the success of my children. I've changed my way of thinking and with it – my destiny. Now I help the people from my community to see through what I saw.

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My name is Veselina and I'm 28 years old. I got married at 16. I chose it myself, because I thought I loved my husband. That, however, turned out to be a delusion... I was married for only 25 days. I couldn't stand the constant harassment. My mother-in-law scolded me all the time, starting on the very second day. She couldn't stand me, but I didn't understand why. When I told my husband about it, he too started treating me badly. I don't know how I brought myself to do it, but I got home to my parents. Now I don't regret this decision.

Why should I stay, when even my husband doesn't care about me? The love he was swearing by all the time turned out to be false on the third day after the wedding. I tried to be patient, but I couldn't...



It seems that marrying for love is a weird thing, and it's not like in the movies. I thought love has no boundaries, but my love was blind... maybe because I was young. With the years going, I realized I've made a huge mistake, but we can't bring back the time.

Now I'm very well – I work in the greenhouse in Rakovski and receive a salary of 500 BGN. No one can boss me around; I can see my life from a different point of view. No one can make me get married in this moment, because when one reaches this age, one thinks in a different way about life. Even though I don't have good education, at my age one is more mature and can see love differently. I'm happy with my life now, I have a serious boyfriend and I feel secure. I'm glad I'm not married, because probably I would have had several children and lot to worry about.

The mistake I made is repeated by many girls in my town. I appeal to them not to act too hastily about getting married; we are women – one kiss makes our knees soften and we think this is love, and then it turns out just an illusion. Young girls should not get married early – they should first finish their education, live with their parents for a while and then get married; also an educated woman is the best thing in the world, that's why children should think about education, not about marriage.

Don't repeat my mistake!!!



I am Maria Yankova Krivonožova, I'm 16 years old. I am studying "Technological Tourism" in "St. Kliment Ohridski" Secondary School in Rakitovo. I'm in the 10th grade and in the 11th I'll be studying in the USA. 10 months ago I took part in a competition for the students exchange program Yes. I've won against 1500 people from Bulgaria and now I'm one of the 8 finalists going for one year to the USA with a scholarship. I'm proud of my accomplishment and I think that a lot of people from my community can achieve their dreams if they study and develop, if they make the right decisions and fight to get what they want.

I chose not to get married early, because I had realized that if this happened I would ruin my life, I wouldn't be happy and wouldn't be able to get my dreams come true. In the Roma neighborhood there are a lot of examples I've seen and they made it quite clear that early marriage is not the right path to go in.

I think early marriage is a barrier that doesn't allow you to achieve more, doesn't give you the opportunity to look at the world from a different point of view and limits your development. For me, early marriage is a mistake with many irreversible consequences.

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I am Eshref Ismail Rustem and I'm 22 years old. I'm in the third year in the Agricultural College in the city of Plovdiv and I work as a health mediator in the Peshtera Municipality. I chose to study and develop instead of getting married early, because I saw that this is not an alternative. I saw my friends and family having hard time being 13-15 years old with 1-2 children, with problems, bigger than themselves, while I continued my education after the 8th grade. Then I realized something: I decided that I had right to a better and quality life.

Of course, it wasn't easy for me to go further up. My parents and family were saying "There is no point in taking university degree, what are you going to become – a priest's wife? We are Roma and no one will give you work."

But I proved them wrong. With lots of work and will one can achieve anything, regardless of who you are – Roma, Turk, Bulgarian, etc.

Now they all support me in everything I do.



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I am Gyulbahar Yasharova and I am 19 years old. I graduated from the Vocational High School in Food Technologies "Atanas Chengelev" in Peshtera with specialization as Economist-Manager and this year I have been admitted in the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, majoring Plant Biology. I've decided to continue my education, to develop more and more, since this will give me the opportunity for best achievement in the future. I don't approve the early marriages because this is not a solution for a better life.

The reasons Roma people are not well received in the society is because of the problems in our own community. These problems are clear for everyone and those are: education, illiteracy, social status, traditions.

The school has its responsibility for these problems, because there is no mixing of the different ethnic groups and no quality education, while Roma children have difficulties with being accepted in mixed schools.

The facts point that in mixed schools children are more educated and want to reach a higher level of development, instead of thinking about marriage. There are many fundamental problems in segregated schools. It turns out that children are not well educated, deprived of the teachers' attention, who, on the other part, do not have enough experience with extracurricular activities. We are all witnesses to this vicious circle that also concerns the early marriages in the Roma community.

Would this continue if the community has the chance to communicate more with others?

Of course not. Then each will open their heart towards the other and there will be understanding. If we communicate more with each other, we will enrich our notions of the world, we will be more self-confident and every time we'll make a new step in our lives so that we can do good deeds.

The idea that the parents must decide whom their children will marry has become increasingly unacceptable: 52, 2% of the Roma questioned within the survey do not approve this idea, while on contrary 34 5% still accept it. 69, 1% of the Roma rejects the traditional payments of dowry.



My name is Iliana and I am from the town of Vratsa. I'm 29 years old, married with three children. I'm Roma. I want to tell you my story. I was in the 8th grade when I found a boyfriend like most of the girls my age. We had been together for quite a long time when one day I found out I was pregnant. That's where my troubles began. He faced me with a dilemma: either I would make an abortion and we would stay together, or we would split up. As hard as it was, I decided to have the baby and raise it on my own. I was only in the 9th grade. He really left me. I stopped attending school because of the pregnancy. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. When she was 7 months old I met my present husband. He took me and my baby

and we had two more children. Now we are raising the three of them and we are very happy, but I have realized the mistake I made being in my imprudence, because I can't find a job since I don't have education. Right now I am unemployed. I have two daughters and I would really like to help them avoid my mistakes.

My name is Berta Gabor. I was born in 1951 in the Sandominik village in Romania. I got married for the first time when I was 13 and I had my first child when I was 15. I divorced my first husband and remarried when I was 15. My second husband's parents were against our marriage, because he had another woman, but my husband wanted me and no one else. That's why there were many problems in the family. We had to move and rent an apartment. After 2 years his parents forgave us and we moved back to live together, but with many difficulties and disagreements between us.

I have 8 children. During our marriage my husband has hit me many times, until my children grew up strong enough to protect me.

In our community – Gabori, there is a tradition for stealing girls. The boys look around and say when they like a girl for she is pretty and comes from a well-respected family. Then they steal her. We marry our children between the age of 13 and 16. My daughters were also stolen and only one of them was asked for marriage. We agreed, suggesting they could wait for a couple of years... But they couldn't wait. In 2 weeks they stole her, too. I have always told my girls, that if they are not treated well, they are welcome home.

Now I think my daughters got married too young. At the age of 12-13 they are still children who don't know anything about life.

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I'm Klara from Romania. My parents engaged me when I was a little girl and I had to get married and move with the boy's parents when I was 16 years old against my will.

In my community – Gabori, girls usually study till the 2nd or 4th grade, and boys – till the 5th or 6th, because at that age they are considered mature enough and physically developed to work, and going to school is considered a waste of time. Parents take the decisions about marriage and think that the reputation of the family is more important then what children want.

I finished the 8th grade, but with a lot of efforts, since my parents did not want me to go to school, but my teachers kept coming home begging them to let me continue my education. I went to school wearing traditional clothes, with trousers under the skirt. When I got to school I would remove the skirt and leave just the trousers on.

After 3 years of marriage I got divorced.

Now I have a son, who is 1 year and 3 months old and I live with my parents who support me a lot. I have started my own business.

I will do anything I can so that my son can choose what to do with his life.

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**PROJECT „PREVENTION OF EARLY/ FORCED MARRIAGES”**

The project is carried out by Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe” – Bulgaria (leading organization), Liga Pro Europa – Romania and the Association for Social Support of Youth ARSIS - Greece (partners). The project is supported within the DAPHNE III 2007-2013 Program of the European Commission.

The project aims at preventing and reducing the number of early and forced marriages among certain traditional Roma communities in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece by studying the problem, establishing a multidisciplinary network and partnership between institutions, NGOs and the informal Roma leaders, by campaigns to increase the public awareness and the working with Roma families

The activities within the project include:

**Study of the problem of the early and forced marriages:** Since no specific research of the early marriages in the Roma community has been made until now and the project needs reliable data on this problem, a study of the phenomenon of the “early marriages” in Bulgaria, Rumania and Greece is planned in the first months of its implementation.

The survey from 2010 shows that the nuclear family (parents and their unmarried children) is the basic form of the Roma household – such are 50, 9 % of all Roma households.

This study includes sociological research of the marriage attitudes of Roma people in Bulgaria, survey of the legislative and institutional frame, referring to the problem in these three countries as well as a study of the attitudes of the on-field workers in order to have a reliable picture of the situation, the attitude of the different parties, concerned with it and the possible ways for finding issues.

**Establishing and testing a pilot model for early/ forced marriages prevention:** on the base of the results from the research, the project team will suggest different types of activities to prevent the early/ forced marriages. The model will stand on the idea that community work among the conservative Roma groups and families has to be the leading activity in finding issues for the problem instead of the more severe administrative sanctions (which is now the prevailing practice). The model will also relay on the coordinated joint efforts of the responsible institutions, NGOs and informal Roma leaders to prevent the early marriages;

**Educational materials publication:** based on the study and the results of the pilot model, educational materials (video and leaflets) will be published and disseminated for prevention of the early/ forced marriages;

**Organization of campaigns to increase the public awareness:** Campaigns will be organized in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece to increase the public awareness of the phenomenon “early/ forced marriages” and the need to overcome it. The campaign will target the main factors, working within the Roma community (NGO activists, social workers, teachers, journalists, officials from the municipal authorities) and will motivate them to organize activities, aiming to prevent the early/ forced marriages.

**Closing conference for sharing successful experience:** It will be held in Sofia and will summarize the experience gathered in the three countries within the project. The conference will also provide suggestions about an integral policy on the issues of the early marriages and their prevention.

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**[www.amalipe.com](http://www.amalipe.com)  
[www.romanibori.com](http://www.romanibori.com)**

**This booklet you hold in your hands contains the stories of fifteen unique women from Bulgaria and Romania about their ups and downs in life, their battles and victories, tears and joys. Nevertheless how different they all are, they have one thing in common: the love for their children, born or not-born yet, and the belief that destiny is all in our hands and we should strive to provide better future for our kids. This booklet is produced by Center Amalipe as part of the education materials aimed at raising awareness in society about early and forced marriages under the project "Prevention of forced/ early marriages“.**

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