**Submission on child, early and forced marriage**

from

ROMA DESTINY ASSOCIATION

**About Roma Destiny Association**

During 2006, Ivo Koychev, led by the sincere desire to see a change in the Roma ethnicity, started analyzing the social problems of the Roma community in Bulgaria. Motivated to contribute towards this change among the Roma families in Stara Zagora, as well as nationwide, he founded an informal group – Roma Destiny.

The cause around which the Roma Destiny group and followers united is to establish a new way for the Roma’s future. This would be a road based on unshakable values, virtues and responsibilities. The function of the informal group was focused to help resolve the social and educational problems among the Roma community.

From 2006 till 2009, a considerable number of Roma people, along with their families and children, joined the Roma Destiny cause. To them Roma Destiny is not just an informal group of people, but a civil movement, which provides the Roma the opportunity to become a part in the integral processes not only of their community, but also of society as a whole.

For the period 2009 – 2012, Roma Destiny has organized many conferences and seminars in Stara Zagora and other places in the country. The purpose of these events was to acquaint the Roma with the Roma Destiny vision, so they can realize their responsibility as a community, for the change in the Roma ethnicity. Through these events many talented Roma found an appropriate environment, in which to share their creative ideas in connection with the Roma community.

On January 9th, 2013, Roma Destiny was officially registered as an association with non-commercial purposes. Thanks to our partners from different age groups, from the country and abroad, the Roma Destiny cause is developing successfully through different activities, events and projects.

Roma Destiny connects the different generations with one purpose alone – the Roma to have a better future and Bulgaria to become a model in the area of the uniting of the different ethnicities.

**Ongoing work**

Roma Destiny Association develops activities in the following areas:

- *Non-formal education* - non-formal education is a very important factor for the development of the Roma people. Roma Destiny Association organizes meetings with Roma, regardless of age, who wish to learn to read and write, to improve their knowledge in different areas and are motivated to invest in their education.

*- Society and values* - Roma Destiny Association organizes seminars, conferences and forums that motivate Roma people to integrate fully into society, through values and responsibilities. In these events we invite speakers, who are representatives of the European institutions.

- *Youth Club* – The Youth Club of the Association unites Roma boys and girls of all ages, as they create an environment in which they reveal their potential. Through meetings that are organized, the young people acquire the knowledge, skills and experience to realize their dreams.

- *Culture and art* - the main focus of Roma Destiny is to invest in the young Roma generation. From the experience we have accumulated throughout the years, we see that the field of art and culture is a prerequisite for the better integration of the Roma children and youth in society. Every year we are organizing cultural events in which the Roma children and young people develop their talents in music, drama and dance.

- *Volunteering* - Roma Destiny brought many Roma from "Lozenets" Roma region, especially young people, to participate in various initiatives and events, as volunteers. By volunteering, the Roma become part of the social change and thus they are promoting civic participation.

- *Humanitarian aid* - Roma Destiny launches campaigns in "Lozenets" and Stara Zagora region, to assist Roma families which are extremely poor, with humanitarian aid. We are also organizing fundraising campaigns for schools in the Roma neighborhood, as well as for orphanages and House for old people with disabilities. The humanitarian assistance consists of clothes, shoes, stationery, food, wheelchairs, diapers and more.

**Child marriage among Roma people**

One of the most common and dangerous for the development of young Roma generation problem is the child marriage. The problem of child marriage is prevalent and leads to degradation in the Roma community. This practice is prevalent everywhere where Roma are living in Bulgaria.

The Roma Destiny Association’s work is in Lozenetz Roma region in Stara Zagora, where some 25,000 to 30,000 Roma are residing. For now our work connected with child marriage is voluntary.

The problem with child marriage occurs quite often in the neighborhood and these child marriages occur each month. Many Roma families prefer to marry their daughter when she is 12-13 years, to deal with the poverty issue and to offer them a "better future." Actually this not only deprives girls of their childhood, but also leads to emotional and intellectual impairment.

The child marriage among the Roma people has become a tradition. They actually think they are making the best possible decision as parents. Many of the 'young' families, after 3-4 years, separate, and the girls stay alone with one or more children, when they themselves are only 18 to 19 years of age. Roma girls who marry as early as 12-13 years, or under 18 years altogether, are deprived of education and realization opportunities in society.

The child marriages are a common practice among the Roma. Those are very early marriages, arranged or initiated by the parents. This practice is often accompanied by a lack of consent on the part of the Roma girls, thus causing physical violence to them. This causes serious psychological and emotional crises in the girls, who, in most cases, do not want to marry. It is common for the Roma girls to be abducted and it has become commonplace among the Roma community.

This practice of kidnapping forces parents not to let their children go to school, because they fear that their daughters will become the next "stolen" brides. Without proper education and environment these girls remain "socially disabled", and devoid of future realization and construction of a proper family.

We work with a girl, who was abducted from her school 4 years ago, by unknown boys, was raped and therefore given by her parents in marriage to one of the boys. Fortunately, the girl managed to escape and was not hurt, but for a long time she could not go out alone and could not remember what exactly had happened. Thanks to our work with her in the Youth club, she managed to recover and now is ready and motivated to help other girls like her.

When the Roma girls become wives, they are treated as slaves, caring only about the house and the children. The majority of them leave school to stay at home.

These girls without education can’t nurture and invest in their children. In any family, women have a very important role in the development of the next generation. Roma girls who marry as children are unable to be adequate mothers. This is a serious problem that encompasses several generations.

According to Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to establish a family. 2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses."

In the Roma community, the rights of the girls who become victims of prearranged marriages or who are being abducted and forced to a marriage, are not being kept.

Ignoring these rights is a serious problem and Roma Destiny Association sincerely believes it can help by applying some preventive measures. If serious actions are not undertaken, five to ten years from now we will witness whole generations who will live in abject poverty - intellectually and materially. This condition will lead to greater degradation in the Roma community and society as a whole.

Unfortunately, in Bulgaria we see very few project related with child marriage and this will bring big problems in several years.

**What is necessary to do?**

* all nations in Europe should pay more attention to child marriage problem among Roma people, because the Roma people are the biggest minority in all Europe. Roma people have a lot of problem, but child marriage is the most important to deal with.
* it would be very good if in every big city in Bulgaria and European cities where live a big part of Roma people NGOs to work on programs about the child marriage.
* there should be a special program or laws about the child marriage, but not only written, but to be performed by institutions.
* it is important to change the perceptions and stereotypes of the Roma people on their role as parents.
* it is necessary to pay a special attention to the young girls, providing them an environment where they can develop and refine their talents.
* in Bulgaria there are many segregated school with Roma student. It would be a good practice if in these school there a special hour for child development, health and why it is dangerous to be marry so early.

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