

# Emerging discourses on education and motherhood with Roma women.

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## **Abstract**

Previous research has highlighted different factors that limit educational success and continuity in Roma children and young adults, outlining both those linked to cultural identity and those derived from structural racism, which also affect the education system. The aim of this study is to understand how gender influences education for Roma women in Spain and to identify possible changes and/or continuities for formal education and motherhood in their discourses. This research is based on a qualitative methodology, encompassing 19 interviews with Roma women aged between 18 and 67 and residents in the province of Alicante, Spain. The results show that Roma women consider education as something relevant and should not be abandoned. Success at school is not understood as an element of assimilation, nor as something incompatible with Roma identity. Quite the opposite, studying is perceived as a strategy to

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obtain a better job in the future, but also as a project for personal development and growth, as well as an empowerment tool, both inside and outside the community. Nonetheless, educational continuity requires not only changes in its assessment by the Roma community, but also interventions on the structural barriers that prevent balancing life and studies when a woman is already a mother.

**Keyword:**

education, school drop-out, empowerment, motherhood, early marriage, Roma women, Roma identity

**Introduction**

The educational situation of Roma people is one of the priority issues for the European Commission, according to the different reports and recommendations made for a little over a decade<sup>2</sup>. Scientific literature has echoed this priority and -based on different perspectives and methodologies- has addressed the level of education, school success and failure and the factors that contribute to dropping out of school early among the Roma population in different contexts in Europe. The shared framework is the importance given to education as a key element for the socio-economic inclusion of populations in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

However, few studies have focused on analysing and understanding the perspective of Roma families regarding formal education from a qualitative methodology. There are even fewer studies that discuss the impact formal education has on the lives of Roma women (Hinton-Smith et al., 2018). In this regard, our study raises questions, such as do Roma women consider studying to be important? To what extent does being a woman influence continuing with studies or dropping out of school early? What kind of education do they want for their children?

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<sup>2</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu\\_en#documents](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu_en#documents)

The aim of this study is to understand how gender influences education for Roma women in Spain and to identify possible changes and/or continuities for formal education and motherhood in their discourses. Understanding Roma women's opinion and the importance they give to formal education is especially relevant in order to develop strategies addressed to cut the gap and reduce inequalities in education for the Roma population as a whole.

## **Background**

The significant gap in education between the Roma community and the rest of Spanish society has been previously observed in research (Ullán de la Rosa and García Andreu, 2021). Although full enrolment in primary education has been achieved (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013), a gap remains that affects learning outcomes, continuing studying and obtaining higher education and qualifications. According to the latest studies by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 70% of Roma people in Spain between 18 and 24 years of age (69% women and 71% men) have left school before finishing mandatory secondary education (ESO, for its initials in Spanish) when compared to 20% of the whole population of the same age range (FRA, 2017: p. 27).

Previous research has indicated the concurrence of a series of factors, both endogenous and exogenous, cultural, and structural, that feedback and interact with each other, resulting in curricular delay and dropping out of school early (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013; Gamella, 2011; Parra Toro, Ivan et al., 2018; Ullán de la Rosa and García Andreu, 2021; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021). Therefore, dropping out of school must be analysed as a complex and multi-factor circumstance.

Regarding the main factors that hinder these young people succeeding, there is a dialectic between the research conducted from the perspective of the dominant ethnic group (which tends to raise an idea of either a cultural or a socio-economic deficit in the Roma population),

on the one hand, and that which adopts a critical perspective on the patterns of ethnic domination and exclusion that this group shows through school practices, on the other. These include elements such as institutional racism in the school system, the constitution of exclusionary school spaces, and racist practices from the general population over the Roma population (Kyriazi, 2018; Sime et al., 2018). Thus, according to the first group of studies, the main factors that hinder school success are directly related to the Roma culture: the value given to education; expectations, customs and traditions revolving around life projects; and gender roles that are culturally defined from young ages in the Roma population, both for men and women (Asensio Belenguer, 2011; Clavell-Bate, 2012; Hagatun, 2019; Pantea, 2015; Vladimirova and Amudzhiyan, 2020). Furthermore, some studies highlight a cultural dissonance between the values, beliefs and expectations that are transmitted within the family and at school that can be perceived as two incompatible universes and which can lead to a fear of assimilation or losing cultural identity, the so-called *apayamiento*<sup>3</sup> (Bereményi, 2007; Levinson, 2007; Myers et al., 2010). Sime et al. (2018) point out that “when interacting with schools, Roma women often find themselves at the interface of their communities’ and teachers’ expectations”. In this regard, not taking their children to school could be understood as a self-protection mechanism against a process of forced assimilation, as the educational system accepts their children but does not offer them the opportunity to promote their own culture (Hagatun, 2019). On the other hand, factors linked to education are highlighted by the second group of studies, such as the lack of ethnic-cultural knowledge within the education system (Asensio Belenguer, 2016; Clavell-Bate, 2012), segregation at school (Gamella, 2011; Parra Toro, Iván et al., 2017), rejection by non-Roma students and families (Gay y Blasco, 2016) and not dealing with bullying (Levinson, 2007). Jointly and in complex manner, these factors lead to a high percentage of Roma students failing

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<sup>3</sup> This term refers to peer pressure among Spanish Roma targeted to those who do not behave in line with Roma identity and culture. *Apayamiento* is equivalent to the phenomenon of ‘acting white’ (Abajo and Carrasco 2004: p. 38).

and dropping out of school before completing the compulsory stage of education (Asensio Belenguier, 2011; Parra Toro, Ivan et al., 2018).

Studies have also shown the importance of family for young Roma people to continue studying. In this sense, different authors highlight a lack of parent or family support and involvement regarding their children's education. This absence or lack of support is based on different reasons. The social distance between the family and the educational institution prevents acknowledging how the system works, it reduces the value that families give to their children's education (Clavell-Bate, 2012; Pantea, 2015) and makes fears emerge (Myers et al., 2010), mainly related to the gender roles inherited by a patriarchal society (Clavell-Bate, 2012; Pantea, 2015; Reimer, 2016). On the other hand, the parents' level of education (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013; Laparra et al., 2011; Rizova et al., 2020; Afanasieva et al., 2020) or the linguistic differences present between the family and the educational community (Khalifaoui et al., 2020; Río Ruiz, 2010), as well as financial difficulties that many of these families face (Clavell-Bate, 2012; Herrero et al., 2017; Marcu, 2020; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021), are additional barriers to interact with schools and, therefore, to support their children's education.

School drop-out and failure among the Roma community has an important gender component and bias (Abajo and Carrasco, 2004; Asensio Belenguier, 2011; Forray and Óhidy, 2019; Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2006). Differences are already observed in primary education between Roma boys and girls, with a higher number of girls starting school after the age of 6 (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2010). The transition from the last year of primary school to the first year of secondary school is a key moment for Roma students to drop out of school (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2006). At this moment, girls leave school more than boys despite girls apparently being more adapted to school routines, paces and habits (Gamella, 2011: p. 128). Nonetheless, in terms of reaching the 4th and last year of mandatory education in Spain, the figures are quite the opposite and the percentage of girls exceeds that of boys, with girls expressing greater aspirations for further training and achieving higher qualifications

(Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2006). In fact, more Roma women than men continue studying later on (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013). Although only a minority achieve it, research on Roma students accessing higher education also highlights the overrepresentation of women at this level, which can reach 80% (García, 2015).

Early drop-out by Roma girls and teenagers is related to the roles and stereotypes that are socially assigned to them. According to a study by Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2013), the main cause of early drop-out is associated with family reasons (29.5%)<sup>4</sup>, something that occurs more with girls (42.7%) than boys (14.9%). Therefore, a strong gender component is related to dropping out of school, as 40.4% of girls stop studying due to family responsibilities or burdens (taking care of someone), 39.1% due to engagement or marriage and 12.6% due to family pressure, whilst boys mainly drop out of school to search for a job (21.7%).

Some studies have highlighted early marriage and motherhood as factors that lead to dropping out of school early (Adamecz-Völgyi and Scharle, 2020; Levinson and Sparkes, 2006). Teenage marriage is related to the importance of girls keeping their virginity and keeping the family honour in the marriage process, therefore some girls could be pressured to leave school due to fear of undesired relations and the need to collaborate with other chores (Parra Toro, Ivan et al., 2018: p. 326).

Literature also outlines the important changes that are taking place, and which are associated both with the educational aspirations of young people themselves and with the perspective that their family and social environment have of education. Different studies show that the attitudes of Roma families towards education is changing. Nowadays parents believe that education is more important and necessary than in previous generations (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2006; Clavell-Bate, 2012). Families understand it as a tool for future social, economic and work development for their children (Marcu, 2020; Márquez and Padua, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> Other reasons for dropping out of school are personal reasons, such as tired of studying (16.6%), lack of motivation or interest in what they are studying (14.3%), as well as wanting to search for a job (15.2%) (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013: p.66).

Roma families are also influenced by societal changes, so they assume that education can provide different skills for their children which are necessary to generate an income in the future (Myers et al., 2010) and they encourage their children, to the extent possible, to continue studying (Marcu, 2020).

In the case of women, continuing with their studies acquires enormous relevance, and different studies indicate that including women and girls in education programmes (both formal and informal) contributes to improving the perception that women have about their academic skills, thus, providing them with psycho-social benefits, such as an increased self-esteem, personal autonomy and the strengthening of social networks (Girbés-Peco et al., 2019; Reimer, 2016). Education also contributes to transforming them, on the one hand, into active agents when making decisions on their children's educational future and, on the other, into the main driving force for change in their community (Ayuste and Sánchez, 2004; García Carrión et al., 2009; Peña García, 2020; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021; Valls and Simón, 2003).

This research provides knowledge on how the intersection of gender and ethnicity influences the educational path of Roma women in Spain through different mechanisms. It contributes to the existing literature by identifying the possible changes and/or continuities on regulated education and maternity from the perspective of the interviewed Roma women.

## **Methodology**

This research is part of the European RomoMatter project "Empowering at-Risk Roma Girls' Mattering through Reproductive Justice"<sup>5</sup> developed in Spain, Romania and Bulgaria. The project addresses reproductive justice of Roma women as a strategy to prevent gender discrimination that women and girls undergo inside and outside their communities. These

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<sup>5</sup> IP: Manuel García-Ramírez. Duration: January 2019-December 2020. This initiative is funded by the DG Justice of the European Commission in the call for proposals for action grants under 2017 Rights Equality and Citizenship Work REC-AG #809813. [www.romomatter.com](http://www.romomatter.com)

patterns of discrimination are strongly associated with motherhood, as Roma women often become mothers while teenagers. The RomoMatteR project promotes actions to empower teenagers so they can freely decide their life goals, for them to be recognised and valued in their communities regardless of their decisions about motherhood and influence decision-making processes in their communities (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2020).

The first phase of this project involved conducting semi-structured interviews with adult Roma women in order to understand their perspectives and experiences in relation to motherhood and family planning. This analysis was focused on 19 interviews with women aged between 18 and 67 and residents in the province of Alicante (Spain).

The participants were selected with the help of key agents of the Roma community, thanks to participation from FAGA (Federation of Roma Associations of the Region of Valencia) in this project. The strategy to choose participants was aimed at achieving the maximum possible diversity in the combination of the structuring variables of age, marital status, family coexistence situation, work situation, level of education and number of children.

The interviews were conducted by two members of the project, both women, one of Roma ethnicity and the other related to the Roma community. The aim was to create a space of trust and understanding to address personal issues throughout the interview, while also guaranteeing an inside and outside perspective on the topics.

The interview script included 43 questions divided into 8 blocks. One of the blocks explored the imaginaries, desires, and needs of adult Roma women regarding their lives, and how motherhood and starting a family can intervene. Although education was not initially one of the topics included in the script, it was an emerging topic in all interviews, therefore proving the importance Roma women give this subject matter.



All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Spanish after signing an informed consent agreement. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Alicante (Exp. UA 2019 07 18).

**Here: Table 1.** Participants' sociodemographic information (n= 19)

## Results

### Factors that limit educational continuity

Among the 19 women who took part in this study, we found a variety of educational paths, although the majority of them did not finish their mandatory education.

**Here: Table 2.** Level of studies of interviewed women.

In the discourses of women who left school in their childhood or youth, a variety of reasons can be identified for this premature drop-out. Some of them explain that they were not doing well at school, or that they did not continue as they did not like the options offered.

*I remember that in 6th of primary [last year of primary school in Spain] I finished the year and all the subjects were in red [failed all subjects] [...] and well, of course, no interest was shown at home, like saying "why are you going to go to school if you're not going to take advantage of your time". So I stayed at home, I left school when I was 11. (I.09)*

*I didn't study, it's not because I didn't have the chance, but because I didn't want to. When I finished high school I wanted to do a vocational course, but I didn't like any of them, so because I didn't like them, I thought "why am I going to study if I won't finish the course". (I.10)*

Another reason that emerges in the discourses, although not as a priority, is the need to work to contribute to family income. According to Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2013), this is the

main reason for men to drop out of school, but not for women. In any case, it depends on the family's socio-economic situation, as indicated in the participants' testimonies.

*This has happened to men and women in my household, we've worked since we were very young to have possibilities at home and have a better life, in the sense of having what we need, having food to eat [...] we've never said "well, I'll work and study", because we've worked, worked and worked. (I.13)*

The perspective with regard to education is also a prominent element in the interviews, highlighting the importance of family support to encourage continuing with education.

*As Roma, parents haven't been told the importance of it, so they don't tell their kids how important it is, it's an endless circle, and the chain has to break at some point. (I.17)*

*If I'd been in a family who didn't care, they would have made me clean, [or say] "don't go to school", I wouldn't be who I am today. (I.19)*

### **Gender-based barriers**

Participants' testimonies highlight that the different reasons to drop out school early are motivated by gender. As women, their own group

assigns them roles related to care, family and looking after the home, and this influences them in terms of continuing with their studies. Thus, one of the reasons highlighted by the participants is the need to help at home, with household chores or looking after siblings or dependent family members, especially if the mother is employed. This practice of turning to daughters to take care of the home and children, although it is common, is criticised by the women themselves, who see it as restricting their freedom and their possibilities to continue studying, while imposing a huge responsibility on them at such an early age.

*There are 7 of us. So of course, my mother went to work and I, even though I was a kid, I looked after the smaller ones. So that's why I couldn't go to school. So, what happens, well... I craved to go to school. (I. 18)*

*I had to leave school so my mum could work, and I stayed at home with my brothers and sisters, who were small and couldn't be alone. It was a shame, it's like my mother took a piece of me, right? Because I liked studying, I had good results and I liked it. (I.13)*

In the participants' discourses, references also appear regarding family pressure and the custom of girls dropping out of school once they are teenagers. Once menarche arrives, it is considered that girls should begin to prepare to run a home and take care of others in order to prepare for adult life, marriage and motherhood and, therefore, it is not advisable to waste time and effort in studying things that are not going to serve such purposes. This custom is complemented by what was expressed in some interviews with the requirement of Roma brides being virgins, which increases the distrust of families with respect to educational centres, especially secondary schools, which are considered to be unsuitable for girls.

*I know a friend of mine, unfortunately, her parents took her out of school, high school, because she got her period. Because the girl started to develop and she didn't want to study so they took her out. (I.17)*

Finally, marriage and motherhood are also mentioned as a reason to drop out of school. In many cases, dropping out of school after marriage is not due to wanting to stop studying, but rather to pressure from partners, families or close social circles.

*I met a guy and he made me leave school, and I was there studying hairdressing. I loved it, I felt passionate about it and well, I had to leave. I left high school when I was 15, so I wasn't there a long time. (I.14)*

Regarding pregnancy and motherhood as a reason for dropping out of school, although it was not the dominant reason among the interviewed women, their discourses do highlight this as a highly relevant topic in the community. In this regard, we find discourses that show contradictions between their own opinion and the perspective the community can have of a young pregnant woman or a mother who decides to continue studying.

*I think it's good [...] I do, but not many others do. (I.13)*

*Oh, I'd feel a bit sad, with a belly and going to study, I don't know, I don't know what to say [...] I think it'd be weird. (I.12)*

*I know the family isn't going to make it easy and they're going to say "no" [stop studying]. Because they'll say "where are you are going now that you have a child, where are you going to study? Who do you think you are, a young girl?" and they'll think it's something negative... (I.17)*

In other cases, the participants mention that the education centres set limits and barriers for young pregnant women who decide to continue studying.

*My sister-in-law got married to my brother when she was 15, she got pregnant [...] and once they [the education centre] saw her, her belly, they didn't let her study any more [...] when they saw her go in, they said "no", it wasn't necessary in her condition. (I.12)*

*They [the education centre] said that I couldn't go because of my belly and, maybe, as we had to go up and down stairs, a kid could push me or hurt me. (I.11)*

We can observe that some women wish they could have continued studying, even after getting married, and they do not believe it is not compatible with continuing with their studies, even if they are pregnant or mothers.

*Of course, they can go to school, why not? And study. The thing is it's going to be more difficult, because it's not the same to be a mother and student or just a student. (I.10)*

*Nowadays I think that the things we now know, and the way life is, a girl doesn't have to get pregnant when she's 15, right? But if it happens [...], well I don't think her life should stop because she's pregnant. (I.13)*

In addition to the extra effort made to combine studies and motherhood, achieving compatibility between both realities means other members of the family (mainly women) need to participate, so they can look after the children while the mother is studying. However, another option that the women outline is public nurseries that should be close to adult schools or universities to enable women to continue their studies. Therefore, society as a whole, as well as public authorities, are co-responsible for this project being accomplished.

*It's more difficult, but it's possible. Of course, it's possible, and even more so if she has help from her parents, so she can perfectly carry on studying. And if she can't study in the morning, she can study in the afternoon [...] You have to want it. (I.19)*

*Nurseries should even be set up next to adult schools [...] because of timetables and everything, because a baby or a kid is... well, having a kid is a sacrifice. (I.17)*

### **Parental encouragement to study**

Being aware that early marriage and motherhood can hinder educational continuity, many participants hope their daughters do not get married as young as they did and that they continue with their studies to have more opportunities in the future.

*I'd like them to get qualifications, although nowadays many people do study and don't find a job, but it's easier if they do. Well, they should and have a job and their things. I don't want them to go through what I went through. (I.16)*

Indeed, an emerging discourse is observed with some participants who support delaying the age their daughters get married or become mothers. This is not a unanimous opinion, as some women believe that “*there's no age to become a mother*” and that a woman can feel prepared

at 14 or 30 (I.14). The interesting point is that they are aware that this delay would give them space for personal development in other aspects, outlining studying. Furthermore, the right to live their teenage years is asserted in order to not go from being a child directly to being an adult.

*I don't agree with a woman getting married very young, when they could, I don't know, study, for example [...], they don't have to lose their life, their youth, so quickly and become, as they say, a woman from a child, right? From child to mother. So, I don't agree with them getting married so young, before they're 20, for example. [...] I think that from 25 a woman can become a mother. (I.18)*

*If I could go back, the only thing I'd change would be getting married so young. Because you miss a stage in your life, I went from being a child to a woman [...] If I could go back in time, I wouldn't miss that stage [...] I'd maybe get married at 25. (I.09)*

*The advice I'd give is for them to study, to get qualifications, they have their whole life to get married and have kids, and that doesn't need to happen when they're 15, they have their whole lives for that. (I.15)*

Delaying motherhood does not involve contradicting Roma identity, and studying is also not considered to be incompatible with Roma life. Quite the opposite in fact, as the women believe that qualifications and studies are essential today.

*There are many Roma people that believe studying is silly, really, they don't give it the importance it needs nowadays [...] now to even to be a sweeper you need the secondary school qualifications. (I.17)*

*I think it's important that this generation studies, yes, very important [...] We have to encourage them to study whatever their situation is [...] I've always encouraged my son to study. (I.18)*

## Education as an empowerment tool

Some women, as adults, wish to continue studying once their children reach a level of independence when they have more time for themselves. They highlight three reasons to do so. First of all, they outline that this decision is linked to a personal project, the desire to do something they wished they had done in the past.

*[My expectations for the future are] to work and study and, in a serious manner, go to university, that's what I want to do. (I.09)*

*I haven't been able to study, as being a mother doesn't allow you to have those opportunities, you have to be with them, so you can't do anything [...] So in the future, what do I want, well [...] finish my studies, why not, because I dropped out to go and help out. (I.04)*

Secondly, there is no doubt that education and training can provide better chances for the future, opening doors to jobs.

*Study and work doing something I like, not because I need to, I want to work in something I like [...] I want to study Social Work, that's what I want to study. I hope I can. (I.06)*

The third reason identified in the participants' discourses is to be more independent, to not depend on others financially.

*[My parents] have always clearly understood my personality and what I'm like, and I wanted to study, so they've always supported me a lot to study, to build my life, to not go hungry. (I.17)*

These three reasons clearly indicate the possibilities for female empowerment through education and training; an empowerment regarding Roma men, but also related to society in general.

This empowerment is observed in the discourse of the three women who study at university (I.01, I.17, I.19). These university students believe education is relevant. They are aware that not many reach that point and they vindicate their decision vehemently. Family support has been essential in their careers, which is combined with a personal desire to continue studying as a personal project. They indicate that there is a strong social pressure that pushes women towards marriage and motherhood, but in their case, they have decided to postpone those plans, making their studies a priority.

*Many women decide to be mothers or do not study, or do not work, so they only dedicate themselves to their home, which is not bad, but I think that a woman should try everything. I think there's time for everything and everything comes with time. I think you can be a mother, work and study and you have the right to enjoy it. [...] But social pressure has a big influence, a lot, so... (I.01)*

*Now at this point in my life I don't [think of becoming a mother] [...] I want to do so many things before, it's not my goal to be a mother, it's another step on a path I can choose or not, so... now I'm focused on other things, studying, travelling, many things that are more important for me at the moment. (I.17)*

University experiences are conceived as very positive and something that all Roma women should experience as a tool to become stronger and more independent.

*[At university] I've become independent and self-sufficient, you acquire knowledge, strength, courage, and I don't set myself limits now, I'm not scared; what will happen, will happen. (I.01)*

*The best thing that has happened to me has been to study, because studying has got my head out of the sand, it's opened my eyes [...] because you're surrounded by other people that talk about other things. (I.19)*



Fear of losing their cultural identity with which education is often linked is not considered by these women, who, on the contrary, claim their Roma identity.

*I'm Roma through and through. But studying doesn't make me less Roma, studying makes me free, it gives me more power, studying gives me more things. Studying means less Roma, why? (I.19)*

## **Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that Roma women value education as an essential resource with positive elements. The analysis of the interviews reveals that when mothers think about the life and professional projects of their sons and daughters, they prioritise finishing their studies, encouraging them about the need to have a good education to achieve a future job with which they can feel satisfied and that respect their labour and individual rights. These findings coincide with other recent studies regarding the importance of finishing studies as a tool and opportunity to overcome social, economic and professional exclusion (Clavell-Bate, 2012; Marcu, 2020; Márquez and Padua, 2016; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021). Furthermore, among those participants without children, and regardless of their schooling level, education revealed to be important for them. Thus, regardless of their age, level of studies or marital status, all of the women who took part in this study were undivided about wanting their children to carry on studying. The importance given to education is obvious if we take into account that the interview script did not include this topic and yet it emerged spontaneously in all interviews.

However, this interest towards education and training can involve social, cultural and economic factors that can limit it, as indicated in previous scientific literature (Afanasieva et al., 2020; Asensio Belenguer, 2011; Clavell-Bate, 2012; Myers et al., 2010; Pantea, 2015; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021). Indeed, the women who dropped out of school early mention a series of factors, but they clearly outline those related to gender: household chores, taking care of

brothers, sisters or dependent family members, becoming a teenager, marriage and motherhood. All of these examples are mentioned as reasons to drop out of school. These factors will gain relevance in conjunction with the situation that ethnic minority students experience in educational centres, where the lack of adaptation to a multicultural society generates situations of segregation, discrimination and racism that will influence whether they continue in the education system. As highlighted by Parra Toro et al. (2018) “as a result of the gap in education, segregation and conflict, students are pressured to leave school, while their families, based on their experience, cannot justifiably resist that pressure” (p.328).

One of the reasons for dropping out of school highlighted in scientific literature is associated with early marriage and motherhood (Afanasieva et al., 2020; Asensio Belenguer, 2011; Parra Toro, Ivan et al., 2018). Although this was not the predominant reason for dropping out among the participants in the study, it did in fact appear in their discourses as a relevant issue. In this regard, they expressed the difficulty to resist social pressure that pushed them towards marriage and motherhood as the main goals of a Roma woman’s life. Early marriage among the Roma population responds to the requirement for Roma brides to be virgins. This has remained as a differentiating identity feature over time that can be controlled easier than others that are more dependent on the economic and social context (such as the traditional trades performed by the Roma community) (Honkatukia and Keskinen, 2018; Parra Toro, Ivan et al., 2018). However, this custom would hinder educational success (and therefore, socio-economic development) of the community as a whole and specifically women.

According to our informants, the difficulty encountered to continue studying once a woman becomes a mother is based on two aspects. Firstly, the possibility to continue going to class when the woman is pregnant. Beyond a pregnant woman’s own desire to continue studying, the participants highlighted the social pressure exerted by the community, which in many cases sees pregnancy and studies as incompatible and, also the education centres’ policies which could

make it difficult for pregnant women to continue with their education (Asensio Belenguer, 2011).

On the other hand, the time and care that their children need also leads to dropping out of school, but according to the informants, with the correct organisation and help from their partners, and specifically from women in their family, they could make it compatible. In this sense, some of the interviewed women referred to the need for the public system to also collaborate in this process, by providing nurseries close to adult schools and education centres. Being aware of the fact that these difficulties associated with motherhood can influence continuing with education, the participants agreed in advocating a delay in the age to get married and become a mother, and to spend those years studying and learning. Table 1 shows four of the interviewed women became mothers before turning 18. Based on their testimonies, they hope that their sons and daughters do not get married as early as they did and that they study, and also to experience a stage (adolescence) that they would not be able to enjoy otherwise (I.09, I.18). As expressed by one of the participants, *“I think there’s time for everything and everything comes with time”* (I.01).

A clear opinion supporting finishing studies before getting married is found in the participants’ discourses. They establish a sequence that young people should follow, by first finishing their studies and only then getting married and starting a family if they wish. Education and motherhood are not conceived as two opposing universes, but both must be part of a Roma life, yet in a sequential way. This sequence involves delaying the age considered to be suitable for getting married and starting a family. On the contrary, although both are possible, it is difficult to make them compatible. However, that does not mean it cannot happen. Previous studies show how Roma women re-start their studies again after dropping out of school (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013). This often happens when their children grow up and give them more freedom to continue with their personal projects.

Furthermore, studying is understood as a tool to empower women (Aiello et al., 2019; Ayuste and Sánchez, 2004; Gupta, 2014; Peña García, 2020; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021). Therefore, many of the interviewees associate educational continuity not only with the possibility of a more prosperous and stable work future, but also with carrying out a personal education project that gives them knowledge, security and confidence to manage their life without depending on others.

The case of the three university students is a clear example of female empowerment through education. In their discourses we observe changes regarding their life priorities, which are understood as the opposite to what the community expects of them, but which they vigorously defend. These women do not reject marriage or motherhood, but they have postponed it in order to “*experience this stage of their lives*” (I.17). This postponement has also been observed in other studies, although previous research also reveals that many university students access this level of education after completing their family project (Ferrández Ferrer, 2021). In the three cases, family support is essential (Vargas del Amo, 2018), although they may feel pressured on a community level to fit in with the socially constructed role of a Roma woman.

Educational continuity and success have been considered in previous studies as a sign of *apayamiento*, of losing Roma cultural identity (Gamella, 2011; Hagatun, 2019). However, the university students do not identify with this concept. Quite the opposite in fact, as they claim their Roma identity and reject that studying is a reason for losing their identity. The generalised perspective of the interviewed women regarding supporting their children’s education could confirm a change in terms of this fear of *apayamiento* because of studying. Perhaps it is a strategy to adapt to a changing world, a world that is more competitive and, therefore, more dependent on acquiring a higher education and qualifications and where is increasingly difficult to keep the jobs that Roma people have traditionally held. Nowadays education is revealed as an indispensable requirement for social and professional development and, therefore,

maintaining a position that limits (by action or omission) that development is demonstrated as a poorly adaptive strategy.

As long as women support educational continuity, and as long as they manage to successfully complete their studies, there is a possibility that the Roma community as a whole will achieve social progress in the short, medium and long term. Qualified women will not only be able to contribute to their descendants' education and be an example for them (Clavell-Bate, 2012; Forray and Óhidy, 2019; Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2013), but they will also be a reference for so many other women (Ferrández Ferrer, 2021). As they acquire knowledge, skills and competences that are necessary for the labour market, they can improve their options for the future. The challenge lies in proving "that they are capable of combining tradition and progress in relation to their cultural identity" (Vargas del Amo, 2018: p. 103).

Among the limitations of the study, the classic problem arises in qualitative research regarding a low number of cases, referring to the generalisation of the results or the external validity of the contributions. Furthermore, the interview strategy adopted, which is focused on life experiences and biographical contributions, tends to blur structural or environmental factors, that is, it does not allow to account for the phenomena that forms of structural racism entail. Despite that, there is information highlighted in the results that indicates the importance of the persistence of discriminatory patterns and the lack of opportunities in the school environment itself, so this aspect deserves to be approached from an appropriate methodological approach.

## **Conclusions**

This study displays the experiences of 19 Roma women in Spain and how the intersection of gender and ethnicity can influence their educational path. The results outline factors linked to gender that can especially contribute to Roma women not continuing with their education, such as beliefs and values on menarche, virginity, marriage and motherhood, as well as the role of

caregivers culturally attributed to women. This implies, in the case of adult Roma women who want to continue or resume their education, the need to adopt actions to help balance family-studies life, that is, they need both support and help within the family, as well as actions and services that promote balance from educational institutions and public policies in other areas.

This article also shows Roma women are convinced that education is a matter that is relevant and should not be abandoned. Continuing with education is not conceived as an element of assimilation (*apayamiento*), nor as something incompatible with their Roma identity. On the contrary, testimonies have highlighted the importance of education, even prioritising it over marriage and motherhood. This change in life priorities for women would involve changes in the tradition of early marriage in order to study for qualifications. Yet, even if early marriage or pregnancy occurs, the right to continue studying is defended, although making motherhood and studies compatible requires a lot of organisation and sacrifice.

In addition, testimonies show a clear awareness of economic and professional changes derived from a global capitalist system and the need for qualifications to adapt to a highly competitive labour market and the demand for qualified employees. In this sense, education is a strategy used to access the labour market, but also a tool for female empowerment, both within and outside the group to which they belong.

Far from treating Roma women as a homogenous group, this work explored different aspects of their past, present and future life experiences (through projection onto their children) that shape their individual decisions in the context they live. Addressing the inequalities suffered by the Roma population, and especially Roma women, must be carried out from complex theoretical and methodological frameworks that take into account the intersection of multiple experiences of inequality. The participation of the Roma community in the actions and decisions that are implemented in relation to the educational system must also be decisively incorporated. Historically, the policies, strategies and actions aimed at improving the education situation of

the Roma population, and especially of Roma women, have been designed from an outsider perspective without considering the voices of the population. However, new lines of research aimed at improving the level of education of Roma women must incorporate an insider view, that is, the experience and participation of Roma women themselves, in order to overcome the barriers caused by centuries of discrimination.

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**Table 1.** Participants' sociodemographic information (n= 19)

<b>Interview ID</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Civil status</b>	<b>Age of becoming first-time mother</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Level of education</b>	<b>Children</b>
01	24	Single	-	Employed and studying	University	0
02	28	Married at 18	-	Housewife	Primary school	Pregnant
03	38	Married at 23	24	Employed	Unfinished primary school	3
04	33	Married at 19	20	Housewife	Primary school	4
05	56	Married at 16	17	Employed	Unfinished primary school	4
06	28	Married at 17	18	Studying	Unfinished primary school	4
07	30	Married at 21	21	Housewife	Primary school	3
08	67	Married at 18	18	Housewife	Illiterate	4
09	39	Married at 15	16	Employed and studying	Primary school	3
10	32	Married at 19	20	Employed	Secondary (High school)	4
11	21	Married at 14	15	Housewife	Unfinished primary school	1
12	43	Married at 31	32	Housewife	Unfinished primary school	3
13	53	Single	-	Employed	Primary School	0
14	21	Single	-	Unemployed	Primary School	0
15	21	Single	-	Studying	Secondary (High school)	0
16	29	Married at 14	14	Housewife (looking for a job)	Primary School	3
17	18	Single	-	Studying	University	0
18	55	Single	32	Employed	Unfinished Primary School	1
19	20	Single	-	Studying	University	0

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 2.** Level of studies of interviewed women.

<b>Level of studies</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Illiterate	1	5.26
Less than primary	6	31.58
Primary	7	36.84
Secondary	2	10.53
University	3	15.79
Total	19	100

Source: Own elaboration.