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## **Unwanted, rejected, unaccepted: around the problem of “invisible” Romani and Dom children in Georgia**

### **Summary**

The text outlines fragments of Georgian Romani and Dom children’s reality through the prism of their everyday life and educational practices. Romani (or Roma) and Dom children are usually perceived by the majority of society as well as by national and ethnic minorities as an identical, uniform group. Their images are burdened with stereotypes and they themselves – as begging participants in public space – have become inconvenient for the majority of the society, hence excluded and marginalized. With regard to social representations, Roma and Dom children can be included in the category of “street children”, children “out of place”, “invisible” children, and children remaining “at the crossroads” of tradition and postmodernity. A portrayal of the situation of Roma and Dom minorities in Georgia reveals the reality of children in big city environments as well as the dimensions of their social exclusion and poverty. The text was written within field research: “The forgotten minorities in Georgia” conducted by the author in 2013 and 2014 in Georgia, South Caucasus.

**Keywords:** minorities, children in the street, working children, exclusion, education, invisible children

### **Introduction**

International literature has established a formulaic image of Romani people as nomads, travellers, romantic musicians with oral tradition who express their culture and history primarily through tales, music, poetry, and dance (Bunescu 2014; Kiuchuko, Hancock 2005; Matras 2015). It is also how Romani people are presented by the media. However, in the everyday testimonies of the inhabitants of Georgian cities and their perception, one will not find any reference to the romanticism and cultural heritage of Romani people. The following is said and heard: “Romani children beg in the streets”, “Romani people don’t go to school. They themselves are to blame”, “They live like in the jungle and grow up in such conditions”, “Dom children...who are they?”<sup>1</sup>. This simplified, stereotypical perception of underprivileged minorities: Romani and Dom people in Georgia, predisposes one to make an attempt at examining their uncomfortable everyday life and outlining the history of its participants. The terms: inconvenient, rejected, unwanted, unaccepted refer

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<sup>1</sup> Fragments of interviews with my adult respondents: Georgian men and women, people with higher education, students and graduates of state universities in Tbilisi, Georgia 2013–2014.

to a physically and psychologically palpable discomfort, i.e. the conditions of extreme poverty in which the begging Roma and Dom children live, to the spheres and forms of their exclusion, social marginalization, exploitation, and discriminatory practices which they experience. In a wider sense it relates to the attitude of the social majority and its conviction that it carries a burden of the impossibility of eradicating the problematic groups – the “nameless mass” of begging children, from everyday life and from the social space, which is so vital for tourism. This also pertains to a type of street children’s childhood which does not conform to with the existing categories of public order and the approved model of family life in the majority society. What is mentally and functionally inconvenient is the everyday reality, perceived by the majority through the prism of the stereotype of a “dirty” child who begs in front of the colourful shop windows, disturbing the spaces of urban prosperity.

In the present text<sup>2</sup> I present the dimensions of this socially cumbersome everyday life of a group of Romani and Dom children<sup>3</sup> who, with regard to their social representations, can be included in the category of “street children”, “children out of place” and children “at the crossroads” of tradition and postmodernity. These are children who are – in a number of different ways – structurally and systemically disadvantaged, without the right to speak, and in some cases, with curtailed access to public goods and education. They are seen in society, but not heard, as they are excluded from all decisive spheres of life. By presenting the children’s struggle with the reality which surrounds them, in the particular conditions of the environments’ indifference to children’s poverty. Its background is the existing actuality – the colourful city streets of: Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Batumi. Against this background I sketch three worlds which meet in the summer. These are: the world of street children and children remaining in the street temporarily, partly composed of Romani and Dom children, the world of the inhabitants of the aforementioned cities: Georgians, and the world of tourists arriving in Georgia. Many spaces including one which is common: the noisy and crowded streets of tourist cities which confront the scraps of the

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<sup>2</sup> The text was written within the international research project “The forgotten minorities in Georgia” completed by the author in 2013 and 2014 in Georgia, co-financed from the grant for own research – *grant for activities consisting in conducting academic research or development work and tasks related to it, serving the development of young scientists and doctorate students*, The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education, Warsaw 2013–2014. The studies were conducted based on interviews (I cite their fragments in the present text), participatory observation, field notes taken in an ethnographic journal, scientific literature analysis and an analysis of data obtained from employees of non-governmental organizations and government institutions which produce programmes and projects for Romani people and street children in Georgia. Part of the obtained data and materials is also available in an electronic version in the form of reports and publications prepared for interinstitutional bodies or institutions supporting minorities, hence the citations from the sources which can be found on the Internet. The key problem lies in the scarcity of academic publications connected directly with Roma and Dom children’s situation in Georgia.

<sup>3</sup> As stressed in the title, in the text I refer to the situation of the poorest Roma children, and my analyses do not comprise the situation of those Romani people whose social status is higher and who – with regard to their position and education – become important representatives of the younger generation of Roma people in Georgia.

world of poverty and the world of prosperity. They reveal only a fragment of the everyday reality of children who, begging, immersed in the actual and perceived poverty, unfair verbal and media representations, branded with the stigma of “the inferior”, “maladjusted”, “intrusive”, “importunate”<sup>4</sup> and convinced of the permanency of their status, are not in a position to liberate themselves from it. Consequently, they follow the common patterns of socially unprivileged groups and are inscribed in the psychological theory of a “scapegoat”. They complete the space of new, European shop windows and post-communist buildings – often neglected, dingy, dilapidated, and they become their component – “a tiring, discouraging and disturbing face” of the tourist side of historic places. Being exactly in these places exposes the urban geometry of power and the question of social divisions (Mendel 2013).

The situations in which the children find themselves ought to be considered with reference to social, cultural and political as well as historical transformations. The history of the Roma and Dom people makes it possible to understand the problems which place these two minorities on the borderland of the social life of the majority, in the context of a habitus which perpetuates class, ethnic and social differences.

### **The history of Romani and Dom people in Georgia**

Georgia is the most diversified country in the South Caucasus region (more: Elbaqidze 2009; Golubiewski, Kulas, Czyzewski 2011). This diversity is reflected in the number of ethnic groups, including Romani people. The Roma have lived in the territory of Georgia and cultivated there their traditions for centuries. However, paradoxically, Georgia “turns out to be one of the few countries in Europe which do not actually host their “own” Roma and in which live (or lived) representatives of Roma groups, the majority of whom live in other countries” (Marushiakova, Popov 2014: 4).

The territory of western Georgia, Kutaisi, and Batumi as well as the vicinity of these towns is inhabited by Crimean Roma (*Krimurya*), while eastern Georgia is home to *Vlaxi*. “The contact area between the two main groups now is the capital Tbilisi, where (mainly in the Samgori district) [UMM: they] live in rented homes as well as Krimurya from Kutaisi and Vlaxi from Leninovka” (Marushiakova, Popov 2014: 4). Due to the unstable political situation in the region, the redrawing of Georgian-Russian borders, the constant internal migration, and the flow of population from neighbouring countries, there are no reliable data on the number of Romani people in Georgia. However, this figure can be estimated at a maximum of 2000 people (cited in: E. Marushiakova, V. Popov 2014: 4).

Initially, the Roma (Gypsies) were called “Bosha” (ბოშა) in the Georgian language<sup>5</sup>. In Georgia the Bosha, self-defined as *Lomavtic*, “live mainly in the cities of Akhalkalaki

<sup>4</sup> The epithets come from the interviews with my respondents – adult Georgians citizens, and refer to the discussion around the question: “Who are Romani people in Georgia”?

<sup>5</sup> They are self-defined as *Lomatwvik*. They live mainly in the territories inhabited by ethnic Armenians, not only in present-day Armenia, but also in neighbouring Georgia and north-east Turkey, where they are

and Akhaltskha, as well as in the cities of Tsalka, Shulaveri and Marneuli, in some villages in the Ninotsminda municipality, and individual families have been resettled in the cities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Gori” (Marushiakova, Popov 2014; see also Marutyan 2011).

Historians assume that in the migration process of the Proto-Romani people from the Indian Subcontinent to Europe, Roma tribes settled on the territories situated along the migration route. The routes are supposed to have crossed the Caucasus. The first references to the Roma in Georgia come from the 11<sup>th</sup> century from the reign of King David IV the Builder. In that period they were defined as “Atzinknebi”<sup>6</sup> (აწინკნებო). At the time of the Ottoman Empire a considerable number of Lom people assimilated with larger ethnic groups, particularly the Caucasian Turks<sup>7</sup>. During World War I and as a result of acts of genocide<sup>8</sup> in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, Lom people from eastern Turkey and other survivors of mass killings and massacres emigrated to the territory of the Russian Empire, principally to Transcaucasia, where they joined the local Lom communities.

The following subgroup distinguished by researchers is the community of Georgian Roma, whose ancestors probably settled in the territory of Georgia after the Great Famine in the 1930s and during World War II. They arrived in Georgia from the region of Kuban in Ukraine, from Bessarabia and Bukovina. A large number of “colourful vagabonds” – as they were called by the Georgian population – settled in Dedoplistskaro დედოფლისწყარო (during the Soviet Union – *Tsiteli Tskaro*), in the regions of Kakheti, the town of Kobuleti and city of Tbilisi (particularly in the district of Kukia).<sup>9</sup> Migration of the Roma to the territory of the present Georgia began at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The process intensified in the period of the Soviet Union, particularly between 1930 and 1970s. The majority of the arriving Romani people came from Russia and Ukraine<sup>10</sup>. In the era of the USSR, Georgia was inhabited by representatives of the Russian Roma, Serbian Roma (Servi), the Kishinyovtsi, and temporarily the Kelderari. However, after the

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also known as *Posha*. The etymology of this ethnonym is not fully known. The same term can also be found in the languages of the neighbouring countries: Armenian (Բոշա) and Turkish (Poşa). Everywhere in the Caucasus the term “Bosha” was used with reference to Lom people (More about the Lom people further in the text). In the publications from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century they were also referred to as Armenian or Caucasian Gypsies.

<sup>6</sup> “Atzinknebi”, singular form: “Atzinkani”, a term adopted by the Georgian language from Greek: “Athinganoi” (Ἀθίγγανοί), literary meaning: “untouchables”, used with reference to exotic newcomers, religious sects, magicians, and wanderers. More: A. Bartosz (2004), *Nie bój się Cygana*, „Pogranicze”, Sejny, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Caucasian Turks; Caucasian Tatars – Azeris from Kars and Armenia.

<sup>8</sup> The genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, mass murders perpetrated on Kurds following the religion of Yezidism, and Pontic Greeks in the times of the Ottoman Empire took place between 1915 and 1918/1919.

<sup>9</sup> The group uses two languages, depending on the region from which migration occurred. The Romani people from Kuban and Ukraine speak a Russian dialect of the Romani language while the Roma who emigrated from Bukovina and Bessarabia use the Vlax dialect. More: Y. Matras, *Romani a linguistic introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 219–220. The majority of Roma population speak Russian, know a few Romani dialects and in the case of younger members of the community – also the Georgian language.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/brief\\_21\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/brief_21_eng.pdf), p. 4

collapse of the Soviet Union these groups migrated to the territory of the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

The last ethnic Roma subgroup distinguished in academic literature and living in Georgia is the Dom people<sup>11</sup>. Dom people (also called Domari people), referred to as eastern, oriental, or Asian Roma constitute the largest nomad group whose members live, among others, in Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus.<sup>12</sup>

Romani people are also defined as a subgroup of the great “Gypsy nation” comprising four ethnic groups, which are distinguished by ethnocultural and ethnosocial features: the Roma people (*Kale, Manush, Sinti, Cono, Romanichal, Kurbet, Mantides, Boyash, Kalderash, etc.*); Domari people (*Garachi, Nawar, Koli, Lori, etc.*); Lom/Lomavi people (or *Bosha, Posha*) and Lyuli people (living in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, not in Georgia).

### From the research on the contemporary Georgian Romani and Dom people

At present, for political reasons the term “Romani/Roma people” is gradually losing its original meaning which referred to a heterogeneous group that inhabited areas of Europe and Asia, interconnected through common traditions, speaking the Romani language. The term Romani is now used as a replacement for a common ethnonym “Gypsies”<sup>13</sup>, recognized in the world of political correctness as an example of discriminatory language. This “(...) traditional label of a discriminated group is intentionally replaced with a different one in the hope that the new name will reduce negative associations connected with the original term” (Weigl, Formanowicz, Winiarski 2011: 116). In everyday communication, Georgians – as was noticeable in conversations – use the terms: Bosha (ბოშა) and Cignebi (ციგნები).

Scientific literature on the Roma people in Georgia is scarce. It refers mainly to historical and political questions. The majority of information pertaining to the Romani people’s

<sup>11</sup> The etymology of this ethnonym comes from Sanskrit in which D<sup>h</sup>oma (डोम) signifies *a person from a lower caste*, or D<sup>h</sup>am – *sound maker*. The pronunciation can also originate from the word Dom which signifies *a temple, dome, house, cult*. There is a theory according to which Roma people were ritual dancers in Vedic and Hindu places of worship. The ethnonyms: Dom, Roma and Lom, which have the same meaning as *a man, a person*, probably have the same root Dom. However, as a result of migration, penetration of cultures, and the adoption of other languages and owing to the external influence on native languages of these ethnic groups, phonetic changes took place as well as transformation into the form Roma, and then Lom (or perhaps not later, but gradually, during the long-term residence in the Caucasus the “D” was changed into “L”).

<sup>12</sup> For example: in India (*Yayavar* – यायावार), Afghanistan (*Zargari* – زرگری), Pakistan, Iran (*Koli* – کولی), regions inhabited by Kurds (*Mirtiv/Mitrib; Qereç* – قه‌ره‌چ; *Dûmekan* – دۆمه‌کان; *Poşe*), in Iraq, Syria (*Kawliya* – كاولية; *Nawari* – نوري), in the village of *Ghajar* – غجر on the border of Lebanon and the Golan Heights, in Israel (Tzo<sup>h</sup>ani – צוּחַנִי), Cyprus (*Yleftos, Aigiptos, Kurbet, Mantides*), Turkey (*Kıpti, Xoraxane, Cono, Gipleri*), Azerbaijan (*Garachi* – Qaraçi) and Georgia (Bosha refers to all Roma subgroups. The fragment was prepared in cooperation with Mr Teimuraz Shamoian from an NGO ‘Phrani’ located in Tbilisi, Georgia, August 2014.

<sup>13</sup> The history of the ethnonym “Gypsies” comes from Egyptian language. Europeans believed that Roma people came from Egypt with regard to their dark complexion and unusual (for Europe) lifestyle.

situation in Georgia, including that of Romani children, is prepared and distributed by non-governmental organizations and institutions which carry out projects for the Roma. In the social discourse one can encounter stories about the Romani people and their social situation created on the basis of oral communication. Important questions arise at this point: Who, then, are the Georgian Roma today? What is their origin and how did they arrive here? When I spoke to the Roma and Dom people in Georgia they said: *I am from..., I come from..., I arrived from...* Thus, there are local Roma people, there are the Roma from the period of migration due to the Great Famine from Kharkiv, there are seasonal migrants – Dom people from the territory of Azerbaijan. As employees of non-governmental organizations working with the Roma indicate in interviews, in the country's capital – Tbilisi – there are mainly Moldavian Roma, and some partly Romanian Roma. Some of them are Georgian citizens, others do not have any citizenship and these are the Romani people who arrived in Georgia approximately 50, 60 years ago. In recent years the number of migrants has risen, increased by children who are probably Roma, Dom, or Kurds from Azerbaijan. Aid groups, such as *World Vision* and a local organization *Child and Environment*, trace the influx to the restrictive policy of the authorities in Azerbaijan towards persons who engage in begging.<sup>14</sup>

Presently Roma communities are scattered in the territory of Georgia. Because of the fact that some of the Georgian Roma still do not have identity documents, the data available on their population ought to be interpreted with caution. The Public Defender, who has recently ordered studies on the situation of this minority, estimates that the total population of Romani people living in Georgia is 1500 (Peinhopf 2014). Data in the reports of non-governmental organizations indicate that the group consists of approximately 1000 people and is one of the smallest, poorest, and least studied minority groups in the country (Sordia 2009). According to other sources there are between 1000 and 1770 Roma people in Georgia (Szakonyi 2008: 4; Sordia 2009). Georgians associate the Roma primarily with street beggars and know very little about their living conditions and cultural practices. “(...) in fact, many Georgians don't know who the Roma and Azeri people are and sometimes don't distinguish between them. Perhaps they also think that it is one and the same group of beggars. Some call them Tatars, not Azeri, as they judge them through the prism of skin complexion.”<sup>15</sup> What comes as a surprise is the information that the majority of Romani people are orthodox Christians, followers of the same religion as is practiced by over 80 per cent of Georgians (Chitanava 2013: 1).

As far as Dom people are concerned, in Azerbaijan they are referred to as *Qaraçiler* or *Qaraçi*, *Garachi*. They are self-defined as Dom people. They have lived in the territory of the present Azerbaijan for centuries, however, historical data concerning them are scarce and fragmentary<sup>16</sup>. Equally little is known about their present situation. After the collapse

<sup>14</sup> Cited in: O. Krikorian, *Out in the street*: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66658>.

<sup>15</sup> A fragment of an interview with a Georgian female, 30, former street worker, Tbilisi 2014.

<sup>16</sup> They were described by Jean-Marie Chopin, *New Articles on the Ancient History of the Caucasus and Its Inhabitants*, St Petersburg, 1896.

of the Soviet Union Azeri Dom people attempted to settle in Georgia, mainly in Batumi, Kutaisi, Tbilisi. Owing to lack of acceptance from the local communities some of them live permanently or seasonally in the outskirts of large tourist cities and smaller towns. The Dom who live in Georgia claim to be Azeri Kurds and the majority of them are Azeri citizens. “The aforementioned Azeri Kurds are identified as Roma people, but they do not belong to this group. They can have a mixed origin, they identify themselves as Kurds from Azerbaijan as they are Azeri citizens. Azerbaijan introduced a ban on begging in the streets, this is why these people come here for three months, as this is a period of stay for which visas are not required. They return after three months – a period of time they can spend here legally. They live in temporary shacks. These are not proper living conditions, especially for children, but they come here to follow this kind of “business”. They do not want to integrate, make any documents, they are not interested in access to any services, unless they need medical care, in life and health threatening emergencies.”<sup>17</sup>

A study from 2008 conducted by the organization *Save the Children* estimated that up to 1500 children lived in the streets of the four largest Georgian cities: Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi. Similar estimates were provided by UNICEF which determined that approximately 1500 children lived or worked in the streets of the largest cities. The international humanitarian organization World Vision estimated the number of street children at 2500 (Rimple, Mielnikiewicz 2014). It is difficult to obtain exact data owing to the fact that many of the children do not have birth certificates or passports. However, the data disprove the myth that all the children begging in Georgian streets are Romani children. The majority of them do not have a Romani origin. NGO reports from 2009 indicated that nearly 77 thousand children lived in Georgia below the poverty line<sup>18</sup>, while poverty affected nearly a quarter of the population<sup>19</sup>. As a result of political and social transformations, having been removed from post-Soviet institutions, has obviously contributed to the problem [of street children], and especially ill-prepared reintegration. (...) We have some anecdotal examples of cases when the same children taken out of institutions were later seen begging in the streets (...) As a result, the issue of street children has been totally neglected over the past few years” (Krikorian 2013). Georgia is still struggling with a visible group of children living in the street (Krikorian 2013). These children are an increasingly noticeable element of the background of the capital’s centre as well as other urban centres, such as Kutaisi, Rustavi, and Batumi. The begging Georgian, Romani, Azeri children, and the begging adults<sup>20</sup> are becoming a symbol

<sup>17</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an international organization *World Vision*, Tbilisi, August 2014.

<sup>18</sup> A statement of Roeland Monasch, UNICEF representative in Georgia, in: *Overall poverty decreased but child poverty reduction remains a challenge*: [http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media\\_20297.html](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media_20297.html)

<sup>19</sup> Report: HOW DO GEORGIAN CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES COPE WITH THE IMPACT OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS?, UNICEF, University of York, 2010, <http://www.childimpact.unicef-irc.org/documents/view/id/34/lang/en>, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> As can be seen from interviews which I conducted, adults and elderly people (Georgians) – women and men, ask for donations in the street, in the underground owing to lack of income or unimaginably low pensions, out of the need to buy medicines, food, heating fuel, to pay bills, owing to lack of employment

of the poverty and unemployment which affect the present-day Georgia. “Many children are beggars, part of them are locals, some of them come to beg from Azerbaijan – “to work”; some are Azeri, and some Georgian citizens. In the district where I live I can see boys and girls who have to beg, obviously, they don’t have any education (...). I talked to one girl, perhaps 5 or 4 years old, she spoke fluent Azeri, Georgian, Russian and knew a few words in English – only for the purpose of working in the street. I asked her if she would like to go to school, she said no. I had an impression that the girl simply did not have an idea what school was. She probably would have reacted in the same way if I had asked her if she was planning to study in the Sorbonne.”<sup>21</sup> The cited statement reflects an entire spectrum of problems which the children working and remaining in the street face.

Social impoverishment is an additional factor which contributes to the children’s begging. Poverty in the family involves problems with the children’s nourishment, and with providing them with school accessories, medicine, clothes, and other items necessary for their proper psychophysical development. Low social status and the stigma of being a pauper deprive children of the possibility of being accepted by the school student community. Another problem is the fact that parents who do not have their own experience of school, “don’t understand why children would attend one, especially girls. They don’t have any education about sexual life, but start giving birth at the age of 13 to 14, and this is useful for begging. If you see a girl holding a small baby in her arms, you’ll be more willing to give her money. Unfortunately, this mechanism works really well for the emotions of Georgians. Some people don’t understand that when you give money to beggars you harm them, as you leave them in the same situation. In a closed circle.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the practice of sending children to work, to financially support their families, is not surprising. One of the respondents observed that the begging children’s parents do the same: they beg. They do not know a different life. “This generation of begging people is trapped. Those who don’t beg have to suffer in slums as there aren’t jobs even for educated Georgians so obviously, there aren’t jobs for uneducated foreigners who come here.”<sup>23</sup>

This way some of the children remain or finally arrive in the streets, where they experience abuse by adults. Another respondent indicates that “it is a difficult problem in our country, so many children are suffering. These children not only beg, but spend their whole life in the street. They are treated like savages because they pick on passers-by, they are intrusive. They certainly have some positive qualities, they are healthy like other people, but what they experience is psychologically horrifying and very difficult to

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resulting from disability or one’s or family members’ illness. There are also young people begging in the street who, for a number of reasons, do not undertake employment, do not search for other possibilities of earning money than asking for donations.

<sup>21</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 24, Georgian, tourist guide, lives in Tbilisi in the district of “Africa” where many of the begging children from the capital sleep, Tbilisi, Georgia, June 2014).

<sup>22</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 28, Georgian, teacher, previously an employee of an NGO supporting street children), Tbilisi, Georgia, June 2014.

<sup>23</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 23, Georgian, student, lives in the centre of the capital city), Tbilisi, Georgia, November 2013.

accept.”<sup>24</sup> At times, children working in the street experience psychological pressure and physical abuse. However, these situations are difficult to diagnose in environments which exclude and attempt to eliminate (chase away) the begging children and youth from the busy and tourist public space of urban centres. Part of Romani and Dom children have become a component of Georgian “street children” and simultaneously – slaves of post-transformation times. According to Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, the fate of these two groups: Dom and Romani people in Georgia echoes the post-Soviet reality in this region and balances its way between two extreme processes: the first of the extremes is connected with economic migration and labour mobility, the latter is a process leading to isolation and a gradual decline towards social peripheries and marginalization (cited in: Marushiakova, Popov 2014: 8).

### **Inconvenient participants in public space**

“Romani people, called Gypsies in Georgia, are one of the largest and at the same time the most problematic ethnic groups. Much has been written about their lack of integration into society (...). It must be assumed that they do not integrate with the local community. (...) We encounter different Roma people in the streets of larger cities, i.e. Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. (...) By restaurant, shop doors, etc., children who have barely learned to walk can run after you for half of the city calling «Mister, please, moni, moni!»”<sup>25</sup>

Romani people are one of the groups which are the most socially exposed to marginalization in Georgia (more: Nanuashvili 2003; Sordia 2009; Szakonyi 2008). According to Georgian law all Roma people living in the territory of Georgia have a right to Georgian citizenship and to documents which confirm their citizenship and identity.

However, praxis seems to deviate from legal regulations and entails a number of challenges of a bureaucratic nature and – as is highlighted by the media – lack of interest on the part of some Roma in becoming involved in social life and the need to have the necessary documents confirming identity. Stereotypes of the majority of Georgians concerning the Roma as a group can be another factor which largely inhibits the social integration of the minority and the majority. The social competences and the knowledge of the Georgian language of a part of the Roma people are not sufficient to fill in the necessary documents in offices and deal with formalities necessary to receive an identity document, passport, or other certificates and documents.<sup>26</sup> This situation complicates their participation in society and precludes equal treatment, including access to welfare benefits (they do not know where to

<sup>24</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 23, Georgian, student, lives in the centre of the capital city), Tbilisi, Georgia, November 2013.

<sup>25</sup> O Romach i naszym sąsiedzie Kolii słów kilka, 2012: <http://lifein20kg.com/o-romach-i-naszym-sasiedzie-kolii-slow-kilka/>.

<sup>26</sup> To avoid harmful simplifications I would like to indicate that the knowledge of Russian or Georgian depends on the place of residence. Some of the Roma people speak Russian fluently. The level of command of the Georgian language among those Roma who attended school is high, though not as high as in the case of Russian language.

go to ask for such aid); it also limits their access to medical and educational services (school does not accept students without documents). There are multiple causes of their complicated socio-economic situation: “some of them simply do not know where to go and what documents to submit, some of them do not have sufficient amounts of money to have a passport made, while others do not have time to leave their children at home” (Ninuradze 2012).

After the turbulent political transformations in the 1990s and reforms from the beginning of the new century, in particular the Rose Revolution<sup>27</sup>, the situation of Romani people changed dramatically. Men lost regular jobs and a chance of petty trade based on the rule of “speculation”. In the free market economy the Roma as a minority and stigmatized group were removed from their economic niche by the rest of the Georgian society. Moreover, their traditional professions, such as mobile blacksmithing, petty trade, or palmistry do not conform to the reality of the modern world. Traditional Roma activities do not meet the needs and reality of consumer culture.

In these conditions, combined with the acute economic crisis, the growing unemployment in the Georgian society and the deteriorating socio-living conditions, some of the Roma people are searching for alternative sources of income in temporary or permanent emigration, trade, and the practice of begging in the street. However, it must be stressed that begging does not concern only the Roma or the aforementioned Dom people (Kurds from Azerbaijan – mainly children and women with new-borns in their arms, accompanied by elder children scattered nearby). It also refers to a wider group of Georgian children, adults and elderly people whose economic situation in present day Georgia has forced them to stand in the street and extend their hands in a gesture of asking. Still, begging in the street seems to be far more difficult for the Roma and Dom people as they are distinct, both in how they are perceived and in visual aspects, from the majority of poor Georgians. Additionally, with regard to the strong stereotype and social isolation, some Georgians feel dislike, some fear the otherness, or “being robbed” or build distance and an invisible but palpable wall of contempt. Certain types of behaviour of adults and other children violate the bodily integrity of begging children: “If they behave too noisily, or something of this kind, Georgians shout at them, threaten them. Once I saw a man who – perhaps didn’t beat, but gripped a girl forcefully because she was speaking to another girl and this Georgian girl shouted at her. He was an adult Georgian who, as it seemed, wanted to protect the Georgian girl so he pushed the begging girl from the Georgian girl”.<sup>28</sup>

Another respondent indicates: “Some passers-by give money, but others are very radical and rude – they can beat, hit children. They don’t pay attention to the fact that these are children, as a Georgian woman I feel strongly about such behaviour”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The peaceful and bloodless Rose Revolution took place in 2003, it was a ground-breaking moment of state transformations in Georgia.

<sup>28</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 24, Georgian, tourist guide, lives in Tbilisi in the district of “Africa” where many of the children begging in the capital sleep), Tbilisi, Georgia, June 2014.

<sup>29</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 28, Georgian, teacher, former employee of an NGO supporting street children), Tbilisi, Georgia, June 2014.

Roma and Dom children do not ask for donations near Georgian churches nor do they use words of prayer in the Georgian language when asking for financial help from the passers-by – the users of public space. They have their own peculiar strategies of behaviour (entering the intimate space of passers-by, appropriating this space, following the tourists, gripping and clinging to passers-by's hands and legs, taking bottles with drinks or food from the tourists' hands, constant verbal and visual contact, strong gesticulation) by which they attempt to elicit money from tourists. "You may meet children under four lying on the ground wrapped in warm sheets, but also while walking some may grab you by your legs and not let go until you give them money. Passers-by sometimes get angry and even kick over their heads, until the older girls start shouting. You can also see Roma people on the bus or metro, singing or reciting a short poem, before they start walking along the aisle to gather coins" (Ninuradze 2012).

Roma and Dom people usually have their own spaces and places where they beg – in the centres and historic parts of the city, near larger crossroads and in bazaars. At times, the space they appropriate is the centre of a pavement, the central point by traffic lights, places near the entrance to monuments, restaurants or the space of the streets where they walk among and with tourists.<sup>30</sup> One of the respondents referred to her observations in which she draws attention to the danger connected with young children begging in the metro, on platforms, in the streets: "It's dangerous because they do what they want, but at the same time they can hurt themselves. Sometimes they kick each other on the underground platform, they show off simply because they feel like it. It's a game for them, but while they play this way they can hurt themselves."<sup>31</sup>

Dom people's begging practices are also linked to a number of tales and media reports about the international "economic mafia of beggars" which takes advantage of Roma and Dom children's labour to gain funds for their own purposes. In social discourse one can hear reports about deliberate "breaking of children's arms and legs" as a strategy used in street begging and their economic exploitation by wealthy groups of adults. One of the respondents indicated that "Azeri Kurds rarely cooperate. Violence towards children is commonplace among them. It is true, that it is commonplace among the Roma as well, but Azeri not only beat them. They use harsher methods, for example: they burn children. However (...) it is hard to reach these communities, they have the so called supervisors who control begging."<sup>32</sup> Another respondent drew attention to the types of punishment which children receive if they do not bring the expected earnings from begging: "we had a case when a child was burned with hot metal because he or she did not bring home any money. The Ministry decided then to remove the child from the family, the child was placed in a care facility in a distant place so that the family would not be able to access him

<sup>30</sup> Based on participatory observation and interviews with Georgians and tourists in 2013 and 2014, in the city and towns of Tbilisi, Kobuleti, Batumi, and Kutaisi.

<sup>31</sup> A fragment of an interview (female, 30, teacher), Tbilisi, Georgia May 2014.

<sup>32</sup> A fragment of an interview with a former street worker in a project supporting street children in Tbilisi, and Georgia, August 2014.

or her. Children are placed in such facilities, for instance, emergency intervention facilities – the police take them there. Sometimes they escape, sometimes they are picked up by their parents who come with Azeri passports, saying that they are not Georgian citizens so the social service does not have the right to keep them there.”<sup>33</sup>

Another problem connected with street children, particularly girls, is sexual abuse and girls’ prostitution. Girls’ prostitution begins approximately at the age of fifteen. However, the subject is a taboo in Georgia and it is extremely difficult to obtain any information on this practice and the scale of this phenomenon.

Asked about their origin, the begging children and youth in Tbilisi streets replied that they came from Azerbaijan and that they were Kurds. Such conclusions can also be drawn from the previously cited research by Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov (2014). They indicate that the local population in Georgia is convinced that Dom groups are Kurds. Moreover, the Dom themselves publically state that they are Kurds and their main language is Kurdish. However, in their own community they identify themselves as Dom people and distance themselves from Kurds and their language, while their self-identity is defined as *Kurdi domlar* (Kurdish Dom people) (Marushiakova, Popov 2014: 6). An employee of an organization supporting street children drew attention to the complicated situation of Azeri Kurds in Georgia: „(...) they don’t have any Georgian documents, they only do their “business”. They don’t even want any documents as then the government would probably undertake some measures towards this population. They aren’t integrated and don’t show any desire to integrate. (...) This “business” – yes, it’s forbidden, but begging in the streets is not. This is changing. The Georgian government thinks that a ban on begging is not a solution to the problem because beggars can find alternative ways, like Azeri Kurds. Involving children in illegal activities is forbidden, but begging in the street is not.”<sup>34</sup>

International organizations reports as well as interviews with executors of projects supporting the Roma indicate that Roma and Dom communities in Georgia live in conditions of extreme poverty and suffer from marginalization and social isolation. Their lifestyles are varied, as some of them live in villages, others in cities, and some migrate to urban centres in the summer (tourist season). An employee of one of the non-governmental organizations signaled that “those who live in villages are agriculturalists – of course, not all of them, but this way they have some money to survive. There are also Roma people from Gachiani, defined as the poorest Roma. All that they have is their children. Some families consist of more than a dozen people. Poverty and a large number of children cause that the children are suffering from lack of meals and their subsistence depends on tea and bread.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an international organization *World Vision*, Tbilisi, Georgia, August 2014.

<sup>34</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an international organization *World Vision*, Tbilisi, August 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Georgian female, 22, an employee of an NGO working for integration and civic society, Tbilisi, Georgia 2015.

Among the main problems which Roma and Dom people face, the following have been listed: discrimination and human rights violation, lack of documents asserting citizenship<sup>36</sup> and lack of knowledge about how and where to receive them, lack of access to education, limited access to health care, lack of appropriate protection by the police, social stratification, and isolation from the practices of life of the majority of Georgian society. Other persistent problems are: illiteracy and unemployment (Chitanava 2013: 14).

In interviews with non-governmental organizations and volunteers (street workers) supporting the Roma and street children, the following attributes which refer to the situation of Roma people and function in the majority discourse appeared: “they are poor and they themselves are to blame”, “they can’t work”, “they are lazy”, “it’s a mafia that exploits children”, “they don’t want to integrate”. These are definitions which aggravate the discursive spaces of exclusion, being underprivileged and are conducive to the further social exclusion of subjects with a weak voice, but first of all, they stigmatize children.

### **Inconvenient education**

„There are a few Roma children in my school. Following their parents’ footsteps, they don’t integrate with other children. They barely speak Georgian, let alone English. They never have books, notebooks, pens, etc. Teachers treat them like a lost cause. They don’t press them to study. The parents never come to school and are not interested in their children’s education. Roma children aren’t accepted by their peers either. One of my students was beaten by an older boy. She came to the lesson crying, shouting hysterically. She didn’t want to say who had done it because she was afraid that he would beat her again (where were the security guards!?!). She didn’t want to go back home either, as she was afraid she would get a beating from her mother.”<sup>37</sup>

The school education of the youngest is one of the most serious problems faced by the Roma community. The school attendance rate of Roma children in Georgia still remains unsatisfactory. The number of children attending school as well as access to health care are at a low level, partly because of the fact that many Roma people do not have Georgian identity documents. Another reason lies in the fact – as the Roma explain themselves – that they do not have the necessary information about the system of education. The main reason for this state of affairs is the language barrier, low social status, and poverty, which isolate this community from the Georgian majority. Some children cannot read or write, which is a result of the fact that during the school year some of them deal with petty trade

<sup>36</sup> A programme referring to cases of stateless persons and the prevention of statelessness in Georgia has been taking place in the country for several years. One of the beneficiaries of the programme is Roma people. Within the programme NGO employees visit families, and provide them with information and support in obtaining identity documents. However, the communication problem sometimes lies on the side of the Roma who do not want to establish contact as they believe that they are doing well and do not need any changes.

<sup>37</sup> O Romach i naszym sąsiedzie Kologii słów kilka, 2012. <http://lifein20kg.com/o-romach-i-naszym-sasiedzie-kologii-slow-kilka/>

or begging in the street. This, in turn, is caused by the very difficult social situation of their families who have many children. A number of buildings (including rented buildings) and settlements inhabited by Roma people lack access to running water and electricity (Peinhopf 2014: 27), a fact which is a source of further problems for adults and children and additional duties in their everyday lives.

Also Dom children who beg in the street do not have direct access to education. This means that they have lower chances of becoming active and educated citizens who might contribute to the development of the town they live in, their region, or the country. A low rate of school attendance can be observed among all Roma groups in Georgia. This tendency can be explained in a number of ways, yet the main reasons are: awareness of the impossibility of changing their situation, and the lack of parents' pressure on their children to receive a school education (Szakonyi 2008: 12).

Non-governmental organization employees, mainly street workers, indicate in their reports that the children are motivated to learn and some of them regularly attend lessons. However, a vast majority of the children remain at home, are engaged in trade, or beg in the street. In some cases the parents remain away from home all day, working, and prefer their children to stay at home and attend to domestic duties and look after younger siblings (Sordia 2009: 10).

At times the children express the will to attend school, yet some of them face pressure and reluctance on their parents' part or, in some regions of Georgia, a logistic barrier in attending school. As can be deduced results from conversations with parents – perhaps owing to their difficult situation, silent discrimination, and the indifference of the majority society – very few of them are willing to put an effort into finding ways which would enable their children to attend school. On the other hand, parents express embarrassment and regret that in the situation they are in, they cannot secure their children's school education.

Non-governmental organization employees also indicate that owing to the high level of poverty among Roma communities, the parents cannot afford to buy school accessories, clothes, and textbooks. There have also been cases in which children were sent to school and attended it for several years, but were forced to leave as their parents were not able anymore to pay for the basic school materials. Additionally, the sex and cost of obtaining documents for unregistered children confirming their legal identity, also play a decisive role in whether children will be sent to school. Sex determines educational possibilities as “in the majority of cases it is the boys who attend school, girls are to get married. If a girl attends school and gets married at a young age, she leaves school and takes care of the home.”<sup>38</sup>

Another problem indicated in interviews is discrimination towards Roma children by Georgian children in the course of school education (mocking, lack of acceptance, labeling, and verbal and nonverbal aggression). It must be stressed that when they start school education some Roma children are included in classes with younger students (e.g. they

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<sup>38</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an NGO creating projects for the Roma in Georgia, Tbilisi August 2014.

begin education in a class in which they dominate in terms of height, so they are not accepted, their authority is undermined, and they experience labeling).

Discrimination also concerns those Roma children who, going to Georgian schools, do not know Georgian even at a basic level, or begin education at an inadequate age (they start school at the age of 8, 9 or 10, while other students commence education at the age of 6 or 7). Such practices are illustrated in non-governmental organization reports, where we can read that “a significant percentage of school-age children in the Samgori district of Tbilisi attended school in the late 1990s. Owing to problems with other school children, including bullying and harassment, however, Romani children were kept at home by their parents and have not returned since. Both parents and children stated that the school directors and teachers were not to blame; other school children created the problems. However, because of the fear of putting their children in such a situation, almost none have returned” (Sordia 2009: 12).

An additional factor which accounts for the insignificant number of Roma children at school is the fact that not all parents realize the necessity and significance of education in social integration and in creating a better future for their children. “Due to their parents’ worldview – please do not perceive it as a generalization about the entire community – and a conviction that children do not need education – after all, they won’t become presidents and professors – Roma children, if they learn at all, finish their education after not more than 7 to 9 years”<sup>39</sup>.

Some of the parents do not have primary education, some graduated from primary school in Soviet times<sup>40</sup> or received education in the period of system transformations (Sordia 2009: 11), which is why they refer their perception of advantages connected with school education to their own often negative experiences and disappointments.

### **“To include the inconvenient?” – inclusion attempts<sup>41</sup>**

For nearly a decade Georgian authorities, international and domestic institutions and organizations have undertaken efforts aiming at supporting Romani people and their integration into the majority society. Below I outline examples of projects aiming at eliminating the exclusion of Romani people from state systems and at involving them in the social life of the majority as well as the remaining national and ethnic minorities. The illustrations are interspaced with material from interviews concerning Roma and Dom children in Georgia.

<sup>39</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an NGO which creates projects for the Roma in Georgia, Tbilisi August 2014.

<sup>40</sup> What is important, owing to the adopted policy the Soviet authorities treated public education as a priority, including education taking place among minority and marginalized groups.

<sup>41</sup> In this part of the text I will refer to interviews which I conducted with the employees of the organization World Vision, street workers supporting street children, as well those implementing a project for Roma children – Ms Lela Tskitisvili and Mr Irakli Nadiradze, Tbilisi, Georgia 2014.

The international organization *World Vision* works with street children and adults in Georgia within the project *Reaching Vulnerable Children and Their Family*<sup>42</sup>. The project aims at creating activities for children living and working in the streets, as well as lobbying for the protection of children's rights in legislation. Two mobile teams, *World Vision* and *Caritas Georgia*, work with children redirecting them to various services, e.g. medical services, which provide the children with support. Aid provided by these teams is vital, as data reveal that many of the children do not have identity documents (ab. 40%) or birth certificates. Approximately 40% of these children are Georgian children, about 17% are Azeri Kurds, about 20% are Roma of different origin, for instance Roma originating from Serbia or Romania, while the remaining children are of mixed or unidentified<sup>43</sup> origin. Thus, the majority of the children do not come from national minorities.

As far as the Romani people supported within the project are concerned: "The Roma live in Georgia permanently. They are the third or fourth generation. They have their settlements in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Batumi. An element of their culture is to have many children who beg or engage in petty trade in the streets, or even steal. However, the Roma are more easily reached as we have relatively good relations with these communities. One of our educators, who is also in a mobile team (each mobile team has one educator), is a Moldavian Roma; we have good relations with Roma people through him."<sup>44</sup>

The Roma participate in activities in *Day Care Centres*. Some of them find their way to emergency intervention centres and express their will to obtain identity documents, which they did not have before.

*World Vision* also creates educational projects for street children, but the organization does not focus only on the support and activation of Roma children. Within the planned activities, educators (Georgians)<sup>45</sup> teach children communication skills, life skills. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education various activities are organized in day care centres: lessons preparing children to commence education at school, preparatory courses, and gradual integration into the system of education. The activities are directed at children who come to day care centres and who cannot read nor write.

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<sup>42</sup> Reaching Vulnerable Children in Georgia – project which began in 2012 and is financed by the European Union with the support from UNICEF. Its partners which participate in the project are, among others, Caritas and the ministry of Health, Labour and Social Affairs.

<sup>43</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an international organization World Vision, Tbilisi, August 2014.

<sup>44</sup> A fragment of an interview with an employee of an international organization World Vision, Tbilisi, August 2014.

<sup>45</sup> In environments affected by poverty in Georgia "it's difficult to find Roma people who can read or write, among the younger generation it is easier to find people who have basic reading and writing skills. But generally it's difficult to find people who can read/write, although they speak Georgian. For this reason the chances of finding people who would go to day care centres to help in studying are very low. The problem lies also in the fact that Roma people speak different languages." A fragment of an interview with an employee of an NGO creating projects for Roma people in Georgia, Tbilisi August 2014.

Another project “CHILD” – Community Helping Inclusive Learning and Development)<sup>46</sup> – refers to activities planned for two years<sup>47</sup>. The project aims at promoting access to the basic inclusive services for children and parents from various ethnic groups suffering from traumas experienced during conflicts, due to poverty, disability, and/or a difficult family situation. The activities take place in Armenia and Georgia. In Georgia the project is implemented through “Union Beryllus”, in cooperation with a local organization “Liberta” as well as the Ministry of Education and Science, within the activities of the Division for Inclusive Education Development and Subprogramme for the Support of Social Inclusion.

To support the educational and social inclusion of marginalized children and their equal participation in a community, community clubs were initially activated within the project: “Children with different social background and abilities participate in the community clubs selected according to their interests and desires. Each of the clubs is aimed at the socialization/integration of children from special and regular educational institutions by means of gathering them around common interests and increasing contacts and communications between”<sup>48</sup>.

In the “CHILD” project 15 state schools in Georgia cooperate with 14 special institutions (special schools, orphanages, day care centres for children with special needs, centres for IDP communities, minorities, etc.). The schools involved in the project are part of the Support for the Social Inclusion Programme of the Ministry of Education and Science and are located in nine different regions: Tbilisi, Mtskheta-Tianeti, Samcxe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti, Samegrelo, Imereti, Guria, and Ajara. In all nine regions up to 300 disabled children and children with other special educational needs, including children from groups exposed to exclusion, as well as up to 400 students from regular schools<sup>49</sup>, participate in project activities. Through informal education programmes, the project encourages Roma children to participate in the process of learning, supports their self-realization and integration with children from public schools, and thanks to regular contacts with students from public schools it develops Roma children’s command of the Georgian language.

## Conclusion

The complex situation of Roma and Dom children in Georgia is placed in the difficult post-Soviet reality of Georgian society. Despite the transformations which took place after

<sup>46</sup> Information received during an interview with Ms Lela Tskitisvili from the National Curriculum Department, Division for Inclusive Education Development and Mr Irakli Nadiradze – head of board, Union Beryllus, September 2014.

<sup>47</sup> The project started in mid 2013 and lasted until mid 2015. It was financed by the Foundation Open Society Institute – FOSI) and the Austrian Development Agency – ADA in cooperation with an NGO Interkulturelles Zentrum (IZ).

<sup>48</sup> A fragment of an interview with Ms Lela Tskitisvili and Mr Irakli Nadiradze, September 2014.

<sup>49</sup> This referred, among others, to the aspect of integration.

gaining independence in the area of access to children's/ human rights, Roma and Dom children remain among the most socially marginalized, unwanted, and rejected groups in this part of South Caucasus. They are located between two poles of ongoing transformations and processes of the increasingly globalized reality. The first pole is linked to migration and mobility processes connected with the search for employment and earnings, and refers also to child labour. The second represents the processes of social stratification, isolation, driving these communities to further social peripheries. They result in marginalization and are perceived as processes which can assume dimensions unforeseen in their effects (Marushiakova, Popov 2014: 8). Against this background, the position and social status of the begging Roma or Dom children in Georgia seems very low and this is also how it is presented and perpetuated in the social discourse. Often the children themselves, not knowing a life other than the one in the street, do not want to change it. Thus, they are inscribed in the category of "invisible" children. Despite the fact that they are seen in the streets, in the dimension referring to a diagnosis of situation and needs, they are not recognized or protected by the society. They can physically exist outside the field of vision of the society. Those who remain in the public sphere are perceived as insignificant for society and are absent from the initiatives of social policy. Although these children require aid and relief, the "vulnerable" contexts in which they function and the social distance make them particularly difficult to identify and support.<sup>50</sup>

As in the societies of the majority countries around the world where Romani people live, there are numerous negative stereotypes in Georgian society which make it impossible to appreciate the potential and positive qualities of Roma people's culture and community life. Two important questions lie on the way to the Roma people's integration with Georgian society. The first one is encouragement to eliminate stereotypes and prejudice regarding the Roma as well as finding areas for cooperation and coexistence with the Roma population. The other is the necessity to build trust and motivation in the stigmatized and marginalized Roma community to integrate into Georgian society in the reality and education in the postmodern contemporary world.

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<sup>50</sup> Based on: *Categories of Invisible Children Served by The Global Fund for Children's Grantee Partners 2011–2012*, Global Fund for Children report 2012, p. 1

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