

NEWSLETTER ISSUE #14 / JULY 2026



Dear Readers,

Over the past several years, we have been working together intensively to ensure that no child in Serbia becomes a victim of child marriage.

By bringing together key stakeholders, strengthening prevention mechanisms, improving policies and practices, as well as raising awareness about the consequences of child marriage, the National Coalition to End Child Marriage has, since its establishment, contributed to a systemic and coordinated approach to addressing this issue.

Child marriage is neither a “practice” nor a “tradition” of specific communities or certain regions of Serbia. It is a grave violation of child rights that often does not occur in isolation, but rather in conjunction with many other types of violence. By adopting the General Protocol for the Protection of Children from Violence, the Government of Serbia has clearly defined the meaning of the term “child marriage”, characterising it as a form of violence and a serious violation of the rights of children, particularly girls, leading to psychological and physical harm, the risk of statelessness, domestic violence and trafficking in human beings.

Since taking office as Minister of Family Welfare and Demography, I have not shied away from challenges but have tackled every obstacle head-on and that is why I firmly believe that the Ministry’s team has contributed to creating a vision of a society free from child marriage.

In the new Draft Law on Amendments to the Family Law, we have envisaged the full elimination of child marriage, namely the elimination of the possibility of entering into marriage before reaching the age of 18. The current law permits court authorisation for minors over the age of 16 as a prerequisite for marriage, subject to certain conditions, whereas our goal is to eliminate this possibility entirely in order to harmonise Serbia’s legal framework with international standards and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child marriage has also been recognised as a form of violence against children in the new Draft Programme for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2026-2030, with the Action Plan 2026-2028, the public consultation process for which was recently completed.

When we talk about the effects, only through consistent implementation of the amended legal framework in practice and a change in awareness can we successfully put an end to child marriage, which includes health risks, school leaving and economic dependence for girls.

Adequate and timely protection of children from abuse and violence, including child marriage, is an imperative for Serbia’s institutions. Our goal is to eliminate violence through its early detection and prevention, timely response and comprehensive protection of children.



Jelena Žarić Kovačević
Minister of Family Welfare and Demography

In this issue of the Newsletter, we bring inspiring stories about projects implemented by civil society organisations which have demonstrated in Niš and Banat how joint efforts can contribute to the prevention of child marriage.

Through activities aimed at raising awareness in local communities, empowering children, young people and families, as well as building the capacities of professionals to recognise risks, respond appropriately and cooperate with one another, these projects have contributed to creating a safer and more stimulating environment for children. Below, we present their stories and experiences.

The **Roma Women's Association "Osvit"** successfully implemented the six-month project **Human Trafficking Under the Guise of Tradition**, aimed at preventing child trafficking in Roma communities.

Roma are the most vulnerable group due to poverty, lack of education and social exclusion in Roma settlements, where patriarchal influences are still strong. Under the burden of prejudice and stereotypes, harmful practices such as forced child marriage, begging and the sexual exploitation of boys and girls have persisted. Human traffickers exploit the poverty of parents and families and, in such circumstances, gain easy access to children, who are treated as commodities. As a result of prejudice and stereotypes towards the Roma community, employees of institutions responsible for protecting children and women from trafficking in human beings often categorise these harmful practices as part of "Roma tradition".



In partnership with primary schools **"Vuk Karadžić"**, **"Radoje Domanović"** and **"Sreten Mladenović Mika"** in Niš, in addition to interactive workshops with children, which were educational in their nature and aimed at improving knowledge, raising awareness and empowering children to recognise and respond to the risks of trafficking in human beings, panel discussions with parents were also held. A total of **80 children** of Roma nationality aged 12 to 15 **from the three primary schools**, as well as 46 parents, participated in the activities. Parents were informed about the normative and strategic framework and the sanctions associated with exposing their children to the risk of trafficking in human beings.

With the aim of strengthening institutional capacities, an accredited **seminar** entitled **"Let's Stop Child Marriage"** was organised, bringing together 15 representatives of educational institutions and organisations. The seminar contributed to improving the knowledge and skills of professionals for the timely identification of risks, more effective responses in crisis situations and strengthened intersectoral cooperation, with the aim of creating conditions for better child protection and urgent action by the competent institutions.

An **animated film** entitled **"Knowledge Protects"** was also produced with the aim of educating children, parents and the general public about the risks of child marriage and the importance of timely child protection. Within only 20 days of being uploaded on Facebook and YouTube, the

film got more than 80,000 views, giving the project additional visibility and a strong educational impact in the community. The film was also promoted at a round table attended by representatives of partner schools, the media and a representative of the City of Niš from the Local Team for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.



The project showed that the prevention of child trafficking must start through dialogue, education and the joint action of schools, families, institutions and communities. Through our work with children, parents and professionals, we raised important topics that had often remained unspoken or misunderstood as part of tradition.

The results achieved – from increased knowledge and children's readiness to seek help, to strengthened capacities of professionals and the strong response from the community – confirm that change is indeed possible when action is taken jointly and continuously.

This project does not represent the end of a process, but rather the beginning of a longer-term struggle for a childhood free from fear, violence and exploitation, where every child has the right to safety, education and freedom of choice.

The **Association of Roma Novi Bečej** and the **Roma Women's Centre "Romnjako Ilo"** successfully implemented the project **"Supporting Roma Communities in Combating Child Marriage and Child Trafficking"** in the Banat region, with the aim of strengthening the protection of Roma children and their families from child and forced marriage, as well as from the risks of trafficking in human beings that often lie behind such practices.

The project achieved better results than planned. Instead of the envisaged eight, a total of ten workshops were organised, and the activities reached 241 direct beneficiaries, which is more than double the planned number of participants. Particular attention was devoted to working with Roma families and girls at risk of child marriage by providing them with information about child rights, the risks of trafficking in human beings and available protection mechanisms, which was achieved by printing 600 informational pamphlets in the Serbian, Romani and Romanian languages.

Another significant contribution of the project was the training of local Roma coordinators, health mediators and teaching assistants from seven municipalities in Vojvodina, thereby strengthening their capacities to identify and respond to cases of child and forced marriage and potential child trafficking.

The evaluation showed improved awareness among Roma communities, stronger cooperation among local stakeholders and greater readiness for joint action in the prevention of child marriage.

The project results confirm that awareness-raising, community empowerment and strengthening local support mechanisms are key steps in combating child marriage, trafficking in human beings and violence against Roma girls and women, and that the work of civil society is visible above all through direct contact with communities and target groups.

Bibija – Roma Women's Centre has been implementing the project **"Roma Women's Activism in Protecting Roma Girls from Violence Caused by Child Marriage"** with the support of the UN Trust Fund from October 2023 to September 2026. The project is being implemented in 10 municipalities and cities across Serbia: **Bujanovac, Vranje, Pirot, Leskovac, Kruševac, Kragujevac, Kostolac, Žabalj**, and the **Belgrade municipalities of Zvezdara and Voždovac**.

The overall objective of the project is to reduce the prevalence of child marriage within the Roma community in Serbia and to protect the human rights of Roma girls. The project targets the Roma community, representatives of relevant institutions, and Roma women activists in order to address both the root causes and the consequences of child marriage through a comprehensive approach.

Despite the significant efforts of civil society organizations, donors, and public institutions, progress in improving the position of Roma women remains slow due to the persistent cycle of poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion affecting many of them. One of the key elements sustaining this cycle is the practice of child, early, and forced marriage. The Roma Women's Network is committed to eliminating child marriage within the Roma community through advocacy, community empowerment, and strengthening the child protection and women's protection systems.

As one of the project's final activities, a **training** was held from 22 to 24 June to **strengthen the capacities of activists from the Roma Women's Network of Serbia to recognize situations** in which they can seek support from independent institutions. Representing the **Protector of Citizens**, Ms. Jablanka Tabaš participated in the training and introduced the activists to the mandate and work of the institution. She also explained the complaints procedure and the powers of the Protector of Citizens in cases involving maladministration by public authorities and violations of citizens' rights.



The **National Employment Service** has announced **11 public calls for 2026**, targeting both employers and unemployed persons, with a focus on active labour market measures that are expected to include more than 15,000 participants. Priority continues to be given to supporting the most vulnerable categories of unemployed persons, including young people, women, members of the Roma community, and recipients of social assistance.

In addition, a new approach to working with young people – primarily those from the NEET category (Not in Education, Employment or Training) – is currently being piloted in three branch offices (Kruševac, Sremska Mitrovica, and Niš) as part of the process of establishing the Youth Guarantee programme.

The **Youth Guarantee** is a programme aimed at ensuring that all young people up to the age of 30 receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or completing their education. The program is designed to facilitate young people's transition into the labour market and promote their employment.

As part of the Youth Guarantee Programme, the National Employment Service has launched **eight public calls through which more than 400 individuals** will be included in active labour market measures by providing direct financial support to employers and unemployed persons.

Further information on all published public calls is available on the National Employment Service website (www.nsz.gov.rs), through its official social media channels, and at all local offices of the National Employment Service.