



Dear readers,

Child marriage is not only a social problem – it is a serious violation of human and child rights.

It takes away childhood, interrupts education and significantly increases the risk of violence, poverty and health-related problems, and it particularly affects girls.

As a society, we have the responsibility and obligation to confront this practice and stop it, because every child deserves the right to grow up safe and carefree.

This topic must not be a matter of tradition or culture – it represents systemic violence against children. Children are not ready for marital and parental duties, nor should their life path be conditioned by expectations that violate their fundamental rights. That is why ending child marriage is not only a social policy measure, but also a matter of preserving human dignity and fundamental care for the future of our society.

As a minister whose responsibilities include the issue of gender equality, I am committed to improving the position of all women, girls, as well as boys, believing that every person must have the opportunity to develop their potentials.

The National Coalition to End Child Marriage, in cooperation with all key institutions and local communities, aims to create a safer environment for children. In this process, legal changes, educational campaigns and multisectoral cooperation are crucial for success.

No child should be a victim of this form of violence, nor can we allow them to face choices that interrupt their education and limit their future. The work on the prevention and elimination of child marriage is a step towards a society in which every child can enjoy the right to childhood and freedom of choice.

I would like to invite all citizens, institutions and organizations to join forces and contribute to the elimination of this harmful practice. Fighting for child rights is fighting for the future of us all. Only united can we create a society where every marriage is a matter of choice, not coercion – a society where no child has to give up on their dreams.

Together, we are taking the first and most important step towards a society where child rights and human rights are the foundation for our every step and decision.

Sincerely,



Tatjana Macura

Minister without portfolio in charge of gender equality, prevention of violence against women and economic and political empowerment of women

### Presentation of the Guide for effective support in cases of child marriage at the local level and examples of good practice in 5 local self-governments in Serbia

Accepting early marriage as a Roma tradition is a stereotype, because the reasons primarily affecting it are poverty, lack of access to education and health care, life in patriarchal families.

The Roma Women's Network of Serbia has been pointing to this problem for many years now, trying to indicate to the competent institutions the necessity of addressing child marriage in a multi-sectoral manner.

The local community is the place where children's rights are both violated and protected. Local self-government units have a big potential to implement national policies in a way that is tailored to the local context, as well as to develop their own context-tailored local policies and solutions, within their original mandates.

The importance of multi-sectoral cooperation is enormous due to the fact that Roma children, particularly girls, are at high risk of child marriage due to both poverty and discrimination, as well as inadequate institutional actions in cases where child marriages are concluded in the Roma population.

The press conference held on 3 October 2024 presented the results of the project **Local support for ending child marriage in Serbia**, which was implemented in 2024 by the Roma Women's Centre Bibija with the support of Ignite Philanthropy. The **Guide for effective support in cases of child marriage at the local level and examples of good practice** in 5 local self-governments in Serbia was also presented on this occasion. The Guide is based on the experiences and lessons learned through the implementation of 40 individual plans of support to children and families with the aim of preventing child marriages in the Roma community. The Guide aims to better connect local Roma organizations, institutions and local self-governments in preventing child marriage. The conference reaffirmed the importance and success of the multidisciplinary approach to the child and the family, as well as the fact that a planned approach, based on the participation of various stakeholders, along with the use of various local resources, can lead to

significant positive changes and effects on the prevention of child marriage in a short period of time.

Nina Mitić, Assistant Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, addressed the attendees at the conference, and the field experiences of colleagues who are part of the local multi-sectoral teams in Pirot, Leskovac, Šabac, Kostolac and Belgrade were also presented. In addition to the Roma Women's Centre Bibija, the following organizations from the Roma Women's Network of Serbia also participate in the project: NGO TERNIPE from Pirot, NGO LERO from Leskovac, Union of Roma Associations of Western Serbia from Šabac, NGO Successful Roma Women from Kostolac.

**Presentation of the *Guide for effective support in cases of child marriage at the local level and examples of good practice in 5 local self-governments in Serbia***



**Below is a text by Isidora Nedić, journalism student at the Faculty of Political Sciences and editor-in-chief of *Student* magazine.**

According to official data from the Republic Institute for Social Protection, for a number of years now in Serbia about 200 children on average become victims of child marriage. One in three Roma girls is already married, and one in three of them is already pregnant with their first child (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2019).

“Child marriage should not be seen as part of the Roma tradition, because this justifies and normalizes this harmful practice”, says UNICEF consultant for protection of children from violence and child marriage prevention Marina Bogdanovic.

Underage marriage is a consequence of deep poverty, gender inequality and social exclusion, as well as a consequence of harmful social norms that attribute lower value to women and girls. Experts and activists in this field point out that education is crucial for preventing child marriage.

“In Serbian, the word for education – obrazovanje, contains the word obraz, which means honour, and which is something we take from home. In fact, we need to work on educating the entire family, neighbours, our fellow citizens, friends, and we need to constantly work on raising awareness of this persistent problem”, says activist and member of the Women's Roma Network Maja Simic.

She adds that together with an informal group, she tried to help girls who are victims or at risk of becoming victims of early marriage with scholarships.

“If the girl stays in school where she has the teaching staff that is sufficiently aware of the problems and that will fight them together with her, together with the Centre for Social Work and other competent institutions. I think that this transformation will happen and that they will realize how much power they have with their 10 fingers and how much they are actually aware that with education they can go against all prejudices, even against those of getting married young”, says Ms Simic.

On the other hand, the child rights coordinator from the NGO Praxis, Nevena Markovic, points out that awareness about the importance of education is very low in families and adds: “Those who value education, value their child's life more and vice versa”.

Solving this problem takes continuous work to, first of all, raise awareness of this topic in the entire society, and this can be achieved with the help of institutions, the media, governmental and non-governmental organizations and the community itself.

“When it comes to institutions, there are two directions of response. One is to react, and the other is to prevent. Unfortunately, both are rather lacking at the moment. The reactions to reported child marriage cases are often very lukewarm and sporadic, and often come too late when the girl is already pregnant”, Ms Markovic points out.

Ms Bogdanovic believes that child marriage is not a phenomenon that should be addressed by only one system, but rather that it requires the cooperation and complementary work of several different sectors because the issue is as complex as it is layered.

“It is enough for one institution not to do its part of the work for the system to fail and for the child to be left without adequate institutional response”, explains Ms Bogdanovic.

A systemic response and cooperation between the centres for social work, schools, health care institutions, civil society organiza-

tions and the community is a shared responsibility in the prevention of child marriage.

“It is necessary to simultaneously do preventive work within the affected communities with girls, boys, and their families, also at the level of local self-governments – with authorities, experts working in schools, social protection, justice, health care system, civil society organizations. All of this should go hand in hand with national efforts to strengthen policies and regulatory frameworks that direct and guide both prevention and reaction, i.e. the use of sanctions when necessary”, explains Ms Bogdanovic.

Two years ago, in our country, the National Council of the Roma National Minority, as the representative body of the Roma, adopted the Declaration on Ending Child Marriage, where child marriage is defined as a form of violence against the child and a violation of the rights of the child and where the view that this harmful practice is part of the Roma tradition is rejected.

“No community should have this type of violation of child rights as a tradition”, explains Ms Simic.

The national regulations that govern child marriage are the Constitution, the Family Law, the Law on Social Protection, the Criminal Code and special instructions on the manner of work of the Centres for Social Work in protecting children from child marriage from 2019, which oblige the CSWs to collect information on child marriage on the local level.

“We have a relatively good law and prescribed measures, but they are not fully implemented, child marriage is not seen as a form of violence against children and/or as a criminal offence, although it is already clearly defined as such in the national strategic framework. Unfortunately, the issue of child marriage is linked to numerous stereotypes and prejudices, such as child marriage being part of the Roma tradition which cannot be eradicated”, points out Ms Bogdanovic.

Ms Simic has a similar opinion and says that the state institutions have contributed the most to child marriage being discussed publicly in decision-making forums and adds: “the only question is how well these decisions are implemented and how effective they will be in the future”.

Thanks to the work of civil society organizations and state institutions dedicated to eradicating child marriage, this phenomenon is being more openly discussed in the affected communities. A significant role in raising awareness of this issue was played by the Roma Women's Network and its activists who raised the visibility of Roma women in our society, and especially highlighted the problem of child, early and forced marriage in the Roma population.

“A lot has been done to show the broader community that it is a stereotype that early marriage among the Roma is part of the Roma tradition. Cases of early, child and forced marriage are recorded in a more systematic way and competent institutions are starting to work together to address this problem, which sends a very important message to the Roma community that this is an unacceptable practice that will be sanctioned”, says Ms Bogdanovic.

The role of the media is very important in terms of spreading information and pointing out the nature of this phenomenon. The media have the role to educate and encourage citizens to react and report it when they know that a child has entered into a child marriage.

“Child marriage is never an expression of the child's free will, because even when there is consent, we know that the child has made the decision under the pressure of the surroundings, social norms, insufficient information about marriage, as well as with the lack of alternative options for personal development and thriving and the development of full potential”, Ms Bogdanovic concludes.

Citizens can report cases of child marriage to the police and the closest Centre for Social Work, which is obliged to implement the Instructions on the manner of work of CSWs in protecting children from child marriage.



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The project contributes to creating an environment where gender-based discrimination and violence are unacceptable, women's rights are protected, and both women and men equally participate and contribute to all aspects of life.

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