



Dear readers,

The national community from which I come is associated with the stereotype that child marriage is part of Roma tradition and customs and that Roma girls marry before the age of majority. Although Roma women are often doubly discriminated against, I can challenge these stereotypes by personal example. I think that a woman is a mirror of society, and that an empowered Roma woman is the one who has overcome her fears, educated and economically empowered herself. The phenomenon of child marriage is not found only among the Roma; instead, this phenomenon can also be seen among the majority population in rural, poor communities, and presents a problematic practice whereby a child is forced into marriage with another child or an adult.



For decades, efforts have been invested in putting an end to this practice. Various documents, conventions and strategies aimed at preventing this phenomenon and protecting children's rights have also been approved and adopted. All of this has contributed to a certain amount of progress, but the work and aspiration to eradicate this phenomenon of early marriage will certainly continue. Significant support in overcoming this phenomenon has been provided by the Coordination Body for Gender Equality, headed by Prof. Zorana Mihajlović, PhD, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia. The National Coalition to End Child Marriage has been established. As part of the Coalition's work, various education campaigns have been launched to raise awareness about the risk of entering into early marriage, as well as its harmfulness.

The National Council of the Roma National Minority as the umbrella institution of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia adopted a Declaration presenting its position regarding the elimination of child marriage at its regular session in March of this year. The Declaration clearly states that child marriage is a violation of the rights of the child, that it jeopardizes the lives and future of boys and girls, and that entering into child marriage is by no means part of Roma customs and tradition. We believe in a society in which every girl and boy has an opportunity to receive education and develop their personal potential.

Pava Čabrilovski
President of the Executive Board of the
National Council of the Roma National Minority

Speak Out, It's Your Turn!

The Roma Association Novi Bečej is also implementing the **Speak Out, It's Your Turn!** campaign and project, with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Serbia and UN Women, under the You Are Not Alone! programme. As part of this campaign, the Roma Association Novi Bečej is working to raise awareness about violence against women and human trafficking. In addition to leaflets and billboard messages, [on its social media](#), this association conducts education programmes on the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, in particular provisions concerning human trafficking and those that prescribe penalties for certain types of violence.

Do Not Be in a Rush to Grow Up – A Childhood, Not Marriage

To raise awareness about the harmfulness of child marriage, **the Praxis Association developed, as part of the Do Not Be in a Rush to Grow Up – A Childhood, Not Marriage! campaign, posters that were distributed to local institutions to which Roma women who are exposed to multiple discrimination turn in order to exercise their rights:** centres for social work, schools, health care institutions and local self-governments. In addition, to make as many people as possible aware of the harmfulness of child marriage, posters were distributed to civil society organizations and activists across Serbia.



To better reach Roma communities, Do Not Be in a Rush to Grow Up – A Childhood, Not Marriage leaflets were developed, which promote improving the situation of Roma girls and changing stereotypes and harmful atti-

tudes toward the practice of child marriage. The leaflets are primarily aimed at girls, but also at the entire community, with a view to eliminating the harmful practice of child marriage by applying a systemic approach and empowering entire communities.

Posters and leaflets were developed as part of the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage in Serbia project, funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Serbia and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany under the German Development Cooperation programme Inclusion of the Roma and Other Marginalized Groups in Serbia.

Economic Empowerment of Roma Men and Women – Increasing Employment Opportunities

In the cooperation between **the Roma Women's Centre Bibija and the Roma Association Novi Bečej**, a certified training for members of the Roma national minority for the professions of forklift operator and make-up artist was carried out. In addition, a series of information workshops on employment, labour market opportunities and programmes offered by the National Employment Service was conducted. Training participants also had an opportunity to develop business plans for their future entrepreneurial ventures through mentoring.

Trainings are implemented in the territory of the cities of Belgrade, Novi Bečej, Leskovac and Valjevo, and a total of 52 people have completed the training. This increases the employment prospects of the Roma, thereby significantly contributing to their economic empowerment.

Trainings and workshops were conducted as part of the Economic Empowerment of the Roma – Increasing Employment and Self-Employment Capacities project, which was supported by GIZ.

Motivation Workshops – Labour and Employment Rights

The Praxis Association, in cooperation with representatives of the National Employment Service, held motivation workshops aimed at the economic empowerment of Roma men and women, in which measures and programmes implemented by the National Employment Service were presented.

These workshops were an opportunity for participants to receive additional information about labour and employment rights, with a special emphasis on the right to equality and vulnerable target groups recognized by the National Employment Service, but also about the importance of the active role of individuals in the job search process, opportunities and resources available to improve professional competences, knowledge and skills. Motivation workshops were held in Subotica, Novi Sad, Bačka Palanka, Smederevo, Leskovac and Kragujevac.

The workshops were carried out as part of the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage in Serbia project, funded by the Royal Dutch Embassy in Serbia and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany under the German Development Cooperation programme Inclusion of the Roma and Other Marginalized Groups in Serbia.

Socio-Educational Workshops for Women and Girls from Kruševac, Kragujevac, Vranje and Subotica

Over the past several months, the Praxis Association has, through direct work with the Roma community, raised awareness about the harmfulness of child marriage via socio-educational workshops for women and girls. The socio-educational workshops were an opportunity to discuss openly with participants the practice of child marriage and how it affects the future of both individuals and the entire community, as well as to work to raise awareness about gender equality, the right to equality, reproductive rights and the importance of education.



“We want inequality in relations with men, arranged marriage, dropping out of school and violence to cease to be a part of our everyday lives. We want our children to choose for themselves with whom they wish to spend their life and listen to their heart.” – A message sent by women participants in Kruševac at a women's workshop on the subject of tradition.

The importance of a multisectoral approach to combating and preventing child marriage is also evidenced by the activity of the Roma Association Novi Bečej, which signed an internal document on the establishment of an Intersectoral Team to Combat Arranged Early Child Marriage in the Territory of the Novi Bečej Municipality in May 2022. In addition to the Roma Association Novi Bečej, this document was also signed by the Centre for Social Work, the Department for Public Services, the Coordinator for Roma Affairs, the Pava Sudački preschool institution from Novi Bečej and the Đorđe Jovanović primary school from Novo Miloševo.



Sanja Kljajić
(Republic Institute for Social Protection)
on the role of the social protection system
in preventing and combating child marriage



How do Centres for Social Work contribute to ending child marriage?

Centres for social work have, within their responsibility and public authority, an obligation to protect the rights and best interests of the child. **Considering that child marriage is a form of violence against the child, the obligation of the centre as a guardianship authority is to work to prevent child marriage, but also to protect the child who is a victim of child marriage.** Preventive actions in a given case are those situations where a centre receives information about the risk of child marriage pertaining to a given child, works with the child and family, using counselling methods and techniques, but also available measures for family legal protection. When it comes to a child who is already suffering the consequences of child marriage, measures are applied to mitigate the consequences and action is taken based on professional assessments of the needs of the given child. Financial interventions may also be possible as a way of supporting the child and family, when the relevant legal requirements are met.

Do social workers have specific instructions on how to deal with cases of child marriage?

The social protection system is one of the first systems to intervene by legally regulating in this area. **In 2019, the minister in charge of social and family law protection issued the Guideline on the Mode of Operation of Centres for Social Work – Guardianship Authorities in Protecting Children from Child Marriage** (no. 551-00-00100/2019-14 of 20/05/2019). In addition to the prescribed obligation of centres for social work, professional workers also received guidelines on how to work in this area and all the other regulations they must apply.

What do the statistics regarding child marriage cases identified by Centres for Social Work in the past two years tell us?

During 2021, centres for social work identified 235 children victims of child marriage, of which 16 boys and 219 girls (an 81.2 per cent increase relative to 2020). Among the identified children, children aged 16 and 17 (171 children, 72.7 per cent) dominate, but there is also the noteworthy number of 64 children under the age of 16, who are particularly affected by child marriage at that very young age (7 boys and 57 girls). The report was published on the website of the Republic Institute for Social Protection: <http://www.zavodsz.gov.rs/media/2292/3-izve%C5%A1taj-o-decijim-brakovima-2021.pdf>

Who are the most important allies of the Centres for Social Work in the fight against child marriage?

For a timely assessment of the risk of child marriage for a child, a very important piece of information is how the centre for social work receives the initial information about the child victim, and that information also indicates the organizations and institutions with which cooperation in working with families and children affected by child marriage is most intense. **Namely, the police, judicial system, health care organizations and alternative child care services are the most frequent partners of centres for social work in protecting a child victim of child marriage. Considering that the goal is always to have the child go back to school, it is also understood that education institutions are indispensable partners in these cases.**



Can you provide an example of good practice from the work of Centres for Social Work in relation to working on the issue of child marriage?

One good practice example is the work conducted with a family that, after one of the daughters had finished primary school, intended to interrupt her education and get her married, even though the child was successful in school and wanted to continue her education. The centre involved a family outreach worker, and intensive work with the family and child was carried out over two to three months. The family outreach worker provided counselling services to the family, and the centre helped to find employment for the girl's father and brother. The centre then helped to enrol the girl in a secondary school that was in another city, and the child was provided with accommodation in a student home. The girl successfully resumed her education. There are obviously many examples, but the one mentioned illustrates some of the possibilities of family support and the need to intervene together with other services.