

Interview with **Gordana Stevanovic**, Consultant of the Roma Women's Network for the issue of early, child and forced marriage

As an expert and activist, you have been working for many years on issues of exercising and protecting the rights of the Roma community, particularly vulnerable groups of women and children. How is the topic of child marriage present today in Roma communities and, in your opinion, are there changes in the understanding of this phenomenon?



Unfortunately, early, child and forced marriage is still present in the Roma community even today. The visible progress is that this phenomenon and its negative consequences are discussed more openly in the community. A significant role in raising awareness of this problem 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 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 solve this problem, which sends a very important message to the Roma community that this is an unacceptable practice that will be adequately sanctioned.

Recently you participated as an author in the preparation of the Case Study on Child, Early and Forced Marriage. Can you tell us something more about this important study?

The Case Study on *Child, Early and Forced Marriage* aims to highlight the problem of child, early and forced marriage in the Roma population in Serbia. To explain in greater detail the position of a girl child when entering a child, early and forced marriage, how such marriages happened and how the competent institutions reacted.

The information collection methodology used were interviews, with a pre-prepared case study model. 31 case studies were done. The sample of respondents was chosen based on previous workshop work and knowledge of activists on the ground, who knew the women with the experience of child marriage. Also, based on their own assessment of the situation on the ground, researchers had the opportunity

to adapt the case study methodology in those directions that elaborate some important issues or open new ones, which appeared during the interviews with respondents. The intention was to conduct interviews with respondents, which in certain situations could deviate from the main topic, but at the same time provided plenty of important information that the researchers would not have found out if they had only followed the pre-prepared case study methodology. The interviewers were also told that, if for any reason they believe that respondents no longer want to participate in the interview, they can withdraw at any time.

What made the biggest impression on you during the preparation of the study and what are its key findings?

Their trust in the interviewers and the willingness of the respondents to share their most personal and, often, traumatic experiences. Previous work with the respondents and a high level of trust enabled them to be willing to talk about deeply intimate topics such as their child marriages.

The highest number of respondents entered into child marriage at the age of 15 (29%), at the age of 16 (23%), at the age of 14 (19%), at the age of 13 (10%), at the age of 17 (10%), at the age of 12 (6%) and at the age of 11 (3%).

The highest percentage of childbirths was recorded among respondents aged 16 (26%), 17 (23%), 15 (16%), 14 (13%), 13 (3%), 12 (3%).

There is a prominent example of a respondent who entered a child marriage at the age of 14. She had eight children: first at the age of 15, and the next seven from ages 15 to 27. She says:

"I am against early pregnancy. It is not healthy, you don't have the experience, the knowledge. You need the life of a child. Early marriage took away my childhood, education. The marriage turned into violence and negative things just piled up. The doctor told me that child pregnancy is risky and not healthy for my body."

The majority of respondents who suffered gender-based violence (as many as 22 out of 31) did not share their negative experiences with anyone, mainly due to the feeling of shame, economic dependence and lack of support from the primary family, but also due to the desire to maintain the union, despite being violent and dysfunctional.

How do women with the experience of child marriage see the role and actions of institutions in solving life problems, particularly in matters of entering into child marriage and related topics?

We can conclude from their life stories that they do not see institutions as someone who will help them solve their problems. Because from their experience, even when institutions knew that they were victims of child marriage, they either did not respond or the response was quite mild without a positive end effect. There is distrust in institutions and their commitment to solving the problem of child marriage.

What is the necessary direction of work to eliminate child marriage from our society?

The aim of preparing the case study was to show where we are now. What have we as a country committed to by signing and ratifying international agreements, what is the normative framework of the Republic of Serbia, and what is the real situation on the ground? These life stories and comments from our interviewees give us a vivid picture of who all the key stakeholders are for addressing this negative social phenomenon. What is the role of competent institutions, where is it that they did not respond or responded inadequately, and where is the room for work in the Roma community itself. In each of the stories, reflections and expressed views of the respondents, one can see in which direction the work needs to go. The Case Study on Child, Early and Forced Marriage is available here: <https://rzm.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Studija-slucaja-Decji-rani-i-prinudni-brak.pdf>

Thirty-two Roma women's organizations, in accordance with the strategic goals of the **Roma Women's Network**, continue working on raising the level of awareness and mobilizing the Roma and wider social community to contribute to solving the problem of child marriage.

A message from members of the Roma Women's Network for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign

The Roma Women's Network has been fighting violence against women since its beginnings in 2004, and judging only by the number of femicides this year (27!), we must not stop fighting! We must not allow femicide to happen!

Let us encourage women to report violence on time.

16 days of activism are ongoing and these are just some of the messages we have for all women, for all Roma women, who, unfortunately, often do not even recognize violence. They suffer it for years from their partners, family members and the wider community. Even when Roma women do report violence, the institutions do not acknowledge that, but attribute it to the way of life and tradition.

We must also remind everyone that early marriage is violence against children, especially girls!

<https://fb.watch/oD4r1muj8y/?mibextid=Nif5oz>



With the support of the Trag Foundation, the Network has been implementing the *Institutional Support to the Work of the Roma Women's Network project*. The project aims to empower the members of the Roma Women's Network to work on creating conditions for advocating the prevention of child marriage in the Roma community and become visible stakeholders in public advocacy, creating local and public policies for the prevention of child marriage.

Through monitoring, as well as the campaign, meetings, round tables and the conference, the project advocates for the implementation of policies set as a normative strategic framework for combating child marriage, as well as for the provision of prevention and protection services for violence against Roma women.

One of the current project activities is the preparation of a case study with good practice examples of girls who did not get married before the age of 18. To collect comprehensive and uniform information and data, a case study scenario was developed. The training of activists for collecting information based on the given scenario was organized on 4 and 5 November 2023 in Belgrade. Trained activists and the prepared case study scenario are the starting point for fieldwork and the collection of 64 case studies with girls and the same number of studies with fathers and mothers, which will be the basis for the analysis.

On 21st September 2023, the Governments of Canada and Zambia, in partnership with the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and the Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism, hosted a High-Level Side Event during the Seventy-Eighth Session of the United Nations General Assembly. The event, titled 'Charting Brighter Futures: Utilizing Data for Accelerated Action to End Child Marriage and Achieve SDG 5.3,' was a momentous occasion. The Government of Serbia as a country of good practice has been invited to sign the commitment alongside several other countries globally. This is part of the global <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-monitoring-mechanism/> (which UNICEF leads).



As the world reaches the midpoint in our journey towards fulfilling the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this event allowed us to reflect on how far we have come and how much effort remains to end child marriage. This event brought together key stakeholders from around the world, all committed to one common goal: ending child marriage. It provided a unique opportunity to dive into the power of data, engage in discussions on its utilization, and explore actions to fulfill the rights of girls everywhere.

Furthermore, leaders from the Governments of Canada, Zambia, Serbia, Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States spoke about their commitment to ending the practice.

"Ending child marriage is not just a moral imperative; it's a necessity and also a strategic investment in the future. Serbia's comprehensive approach to end child marriage is rooted in its legal reforms."

Hon. Darija Kisić

Minister of Family Welfare and Demography, Serbia

The Roma Women's Centre Bibija, with the support of the L'Oréal Fund for Women, is currently implementing the project *Strengthening the economic security of Roma women and increasing equality in the Roma community in Serbia* which contributes both to the economic empowerment of Roma women and to empowering them for a life without violence and discrimination. Within the project, Bibija works on the ground with Roma women from Roma

settlements to increase their knowledge on socioeconomic rights, discrimination and gender-based violence, on the available support services for protection, as well as to increase employability. Thirty Roma women received training for professional development and improvement of their qualifications and skills, thereby creating new opportunities for their employment and economic reintegration. All girls have the option to apply to the National Employment Service and after receiving the certificate, this will be recorded in their individual plans.

The Roma Women's Centre Bibija is also implementing the project *Improving the capacities of Roma women for employment and self-employment* with the support of the City of Belgrade – City Secretariat for Social Protection. The project will enable 10 Roma women to improve their qualifications and skills in the labour market.

The non-governmental organization **Praxis** organized workshops on the topic of child, early and forced marriage in primary schools Mileta Protic in Tovarisevo and Jovan Cvijic in Kostolac, with a total of 91 children, 59 girls and 32 boys, from grades 5 to 7. The workshops covered the topics of reasons for dropping out of education, what constitutes marriage, marital roles, and finally the legal framework for these phenomena (entering marriage and cohabiting with a minor), as well as who to contact to report a possible child or forced marriage.

The participants in the workshops were familiar with the phenomenon of child marriage in their surroundings and recognized child marriage as one of the reasons for dropping out of education. However, only a bit more than half of the students would react to child marriage in their surroundings and report it to their parents or to an institution. At the same time, the vast majority of children did not know that cohabiting with a minor was a criminal offence. Through a word association game on the topic of marriage, children learned what constitutes marriage, what responsibilities it carries and what are the legal consequences of entering a child and forced marriage.

“Marriage is beautiful when you are of age. When you are a child, you can't support children, you can't work. It's important to first complete school.” – these are just some of the conclusions children took away from these workshops. The workshops were implemented within the project Legal Aid to Persons at Risk of Statelessness in Serbia funded by UNHCR.



The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Brankica

Jankovic, took part at the final conference held on 15 October, the International Day of Rural Women, summarizing the results of the three-year project *Improving the Position of Women and Girls in Rural Areas*, which the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality carried out in cooperation with the UN Entity for Gender Equality, UN Women, and with the support of the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade within the Improving the Safety of Women in Serbia initiative. As part of the project, the publication *Position of women and girls in the rural areas of Zlatibor, Moravica and Raska districts* was published, and it contains an analysis of the real needs of women and girls from these three districts and shows that the problems they perceive are the widespread traditional, patriarchal values, economic dependence, low level of education and low awareness about their rights, but also point out the lower availability of community-based services. The publication can be downloaded here: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/polozaj-zena-i-devojcica-u-ruralnim-oblastima-zlatiborskog-moravickog-i-raskog-okruga/>

An analysis of practices in local self-government units in preventing discrimination and gender-based violence was also carried out, according to which, out of the 18 local self-government units that responded to the questionnaire, 72 per cent do not recognize the frequency and characteristics of gender-based violence against rural women and girls.

One of the very important activities of the Commissioner is preparing and implementing training programmes for recognizing, understanding and providing protection against discrimination for public authorities and other legal and natural persons, as well as platforms to discuss certain issues related to the achievement of equality of certain social groups, such as gender equality. In 2023, 19 trainings were organized for more than 500 participants from different target groups: secondary school students, university students, police officers, company employees, members of national councils of national minorities. Evaluations from the organized trainings showed that the level of recognition of discrimination and awareness about protection mechanisms has significantly increased among all participants and that there is constant interest in this type of education.

