

In this edition of the newsletter, we present an interview with **Sanja Kljajić**, head of the Department for Supervision of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, on the occasion of the latest annual report on child marriage.



*Since 2019, the Republic Institute for Social Protection has been collecting data on the child marriage phenomenon and publishing the analysis in annual reports. Why are these data important?*

The Republic Institute for Social Protection (hereinafter: the Institute) is in charge of monitoring the social protection system according to the Law on Social Protection, is a responsible producer of statistics according to the Decision on the Programme of Official Statistics from 2021 to 2025 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 13/2021) (p. 19 and 39), and is designated as a responsible producer of official statistics for the area group III DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL STATISTICS, area: 7 Social protection, sub-area: 1) Social protection statistics, according to the Regulation on establishing the Official Statistics Plan for 2023 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 141/2022).

In addition to the above, the Institute is also obliged to do so according to the Instructions on the manner of work of centres for social work – guardianship authorities in the protection of children from child marriage (No. 551-00-00100/2019-14 of 20 May 2019). Like any data collection, reporting also implies a form of research that also contains recommendations indicating how the situation in the subject area can be improved or how a phenomenon can be reduced/prevented. So, child marriage is a negative phenomenon that should be prevented, and the social protection system can often identify victims of this phenomenon, and even provide some forms of protection to children who are victims or are at risk of becoming victims.

*What do the latest data on this harmful phenomenon tell us?*

In 2023, centres for social work identified **182 children** victims of child marriage, of which 12 (6.6%) were boys and 170 (93.4%) were girls. It is evident that child marriage represents gender-based violence and affects mostly girls.

Starting from 2019, when the Republic Institute for Social Protection began collecting data on children victims of child marriage, it was

observed that every year, Roma children were the ones most affected by child marriage, so this report has separately processed and presented data for the most important indicators relating to children of Roma nationality and their parents.

Among the identified children, the predominant age group is 16 and 17 (138 children – 75.8%), but the number of 44 (25.2%) children under the age of 16, who are particularly affected by child marriage at this extremely early age, is not negligible either.

Since the share of children under parental care is continuously high in the observed five-year period, with an average share of 87.9%, it is clear that **parents** are responsible for concluding child marriage, i.e. that they encourage, support or, at the very least, **have a positive attitude** towards this phenomenon. Therefore, it is clear that parents of children at risk of child marriage are a mandatory group to work with.

The educational status of identified children victims of child marriage in 2023 is very diverse:

- 15 children do not attend primary school, and they are of primary school age
- 13 children regularly attend primary school
- 1 child does not attend special primary school although they are enrolled
- **54 children do not attend secondary school, and they are of secondary school age**
- 30 children regularly attend secondary school
- 3 children attend special secondary school
- 64 children have completed education (primary and secondary vocational school)
- there were no children who completed primary education of adults
- **2 children were never included in the educational process**

For the Roma population of children affected by child marriage, the educational situation is even more unfavourable. In 2023:

- 28.6% of children of secondary school age did not attend secondary school
- 10.9% of children of primary school age did not attend primary school
- only 8.4% of children completed secondary education.

**139 mothers were eligible for some form of material assistance (of which 117 Roma mothers),** and the same is true for 97 fathers (of which 78 Roma fathers) – financial social assistance\*, one-off financial assistance, child allowance. 18 mothers have absolutely no financial income, which indicates the **subordinate and economically dependent position of women, which is one of the factors for child marriage surviving as a remnant of the patriarchal model of the family organization, regardless of nationality.**

A very important indicator of the risk of child marriage is the experience of parents, i.e. when did parents, other family members or close relatives get married, especially mothers. In 2023, **for 107 children, one of their close relatives had the experience of child marriage:** 51 mothers, 9 fathers, 26 sisters, 6 brothers, 9 grandmothers and 4 grandfathers. By analysing the data in the past 5 years, we can determine that the share of parents with the experience of child marriage in the total number of parents of these children is 14.1% on average. The share of mothers with the experience of child marriage is significantly higher than the share of fathers and amounts to 24.7% on average in the five-year period.

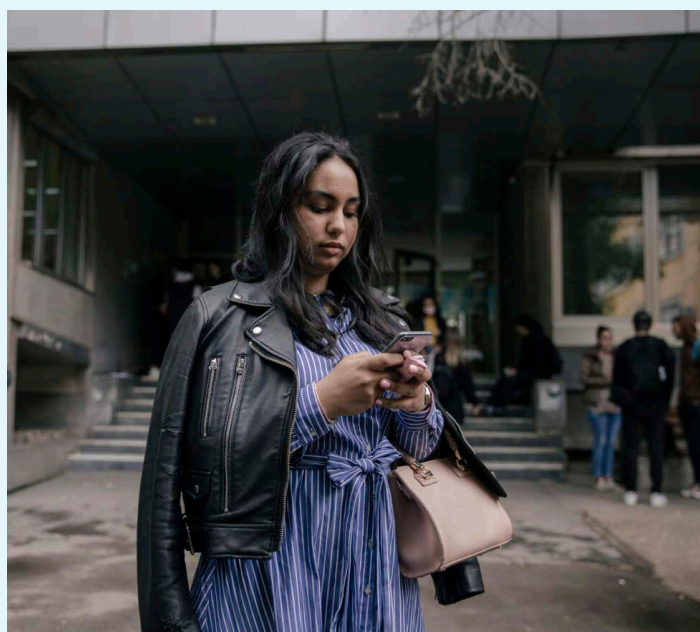
**For a timely assessment of the child's risk from child marriage, it is very important to know how the Centre for Social Work receives the first information about the child victim.**

**Not a single report has yet come from the services/individuals at the source of the data, i.e. those who are in a situation where they can detect the risk in a timely manner, and those are health mediators and teaching assistants and citizens' associations.**

These data indicate the necessity to create a network in the local community that would be motivated to initiate and plan activities to prevent child marriage at the level of their local community.

#### *What can we conclude from the five-year data analysis?*

Data on the nationality indicate that child marriage exists in many national minorities in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, but it is also obvious that this phenomenon is most prevalent among children of Roma nationality, so out of the total number of children – **119 are Roma children (65.4%), of which 110 are girls, of which 36 (32.7%) are under the age of 15.**



\* Financial social assistance is predominant – 73 mothers and 55 fathers in the total population of children victims of child marriage; in the Roma subpopulation – 61 mothers and 43 fathers

In the observed five-year period, we get an even more unfavourable picture of the educational status of Roma children:

- average share of Roma children who do not attend primary school in the total number of children who do not attend primary school is 82.5%
- average share of Roma children who do not attend secondary school in the total number of children who do not attend secondary school is 60.8%
- average share of Roma children who have never attended school in the total number of children who have never attended school is 66.7%

In the observed five-year period, there is a clear unfavourable educational structure of parents of Roma children:

- average share of Roma parents without primary school in the total number of parents without primary school is 87.1%
- average share of Roma parents with completed primary school in the total number of parents with completed primary school is 38%
- average share of Roma parents with completed secondary school in the total number of parents with completed secondary school is only 14.1%

#### **Conclusion**

Compared to the previous reporting period, the number of identified children decreased by 10.3% (in 2022 there were 203 children, and in 2023 – 182 children). Although there are boys among the children (6.6%), the number of girls who are victims of child marriage is significantly higher (93.4%)\*\*, which clearly indicates that this is a gender-based form of violence that mostly affects girls.

The data still continuously indicate that the Roma population has the largest number of child marriages (65.4%) and that Roma children are at a significant disadvantage resulting from the poorer financial and educational status of their parents, as well as their employment status, experience of child marriage in the family of origin, as well as the presence of risk behaviours in the family and immediate environment.

Most of the identified children have parental care (86.8%), which clearly shows that it is necessary to work with the family to change attitudes about child marriage, and that campaigns aimed at the general public are of great importance, as well as all forms of preventive work in the local community, particularly if we know that the data show that the phenomenon of child marriage is present in all regions in Serbia, and that it is not strictly related to a specific type or size of settlement.

Looking at the educational status of children victims, we can conclude that on average 37.6% of children are of secondary school age, but do not attend secondary school. This begs the question of whether compulsory enrolment in secondary school would contribute to the reduction of child marriage.

The Centre for Social Work is a very important institution in working with children victims of child marriage, but in most cases, it becomes involved only when the child is already in a child marriage (in 54.4% of cases, the child was already in a partnership at the time of the report), which significantly reduces the possibility of preventive work with a specific child and family. These interventions are more “putting out the fire” than working to eliminate the risk to the child. Although there is outreach and counselling work with children and families, these interventions are aimed at mitigating the damage that the child has suffered and may concern the return to the education process and material support, and most activities are focused on measures of the family law protection and initiating various procedures with other authorities.

\*\* At the level of the five-year average which is 94.6%

The much greater effects we need to strive for are achieved by eliminating risks, and the Centre for Social Work, as a social protection institution, has at its disposal fewer interventions suitable for this stage, while it has many more for the stage when child marriage has already happened, particularly in situations where child marriage has already resulted in childbirth.

Poverty is one of the causes of child marriage, but the factor of mothers' education is definitely present, along with the consequential economically dependent position of mothers whose children are currently victims of child marriage. The situation in the Roma population is particularly dramatic, where it is clearly necessary to work on reducing the drop-out of children, particularly girls, from the educational process, but also on various support measures for escaping poverty and the dependent economic position of women.

*How can the conclusions from your analysis be used to plan programmes in various sectors and whose support is most important to you in this regard?*

The report contains recommendations resulting from the conclusions, and they are the following:

- **It is clear that child marriage is a form of violence against children, and zero tolerance for this phenomenon is required. To completely eliminate child marriage, a national strategy for the eradication of child marriage with clearly defined activities is necessary.**

Some of the activities should include mapping the areas where this phenomenon is most prevalent, and then local self-governments should implement the activities proposed in the Model created by the Republic Institute for Social Protection in collaboration with UNICEF on their territories.

This also includes allocating funds, and the mentioned Model can also be useful for planning that.

**In parallel with these activities, it is necessary to train all experts from the relevant services (schools, centres for social work, centres for foster care and adoption.**



This newsletter was developed as part of the project “Ending Violence – Empowering Change”, jointly implemented by UN agencies in Serbia, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women, in partnership with the Government of the Republic of Serbia, with the support of the Government of Sweden.

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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